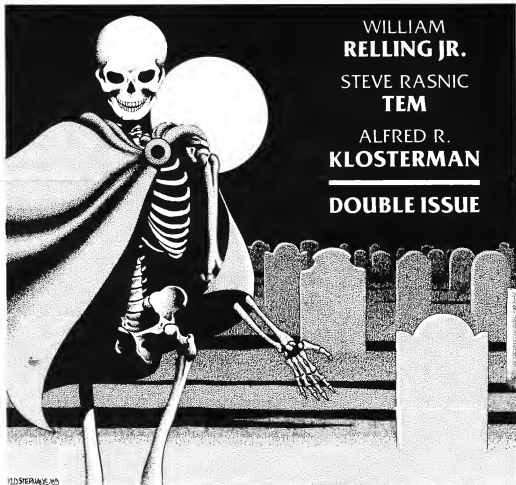


CEMETERY DANCE

June 1989 / Issue 2

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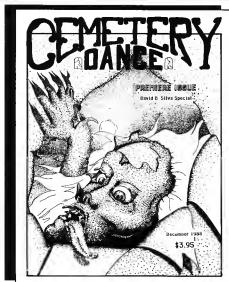


WILLIAM
RELLING JR.

STEVE RASNIC
TEM

ALFRED R.
KLOSTERMAN

DOUBLE ISSUE



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Those are just some of the things being said about one of the hottest genre magazines on the newsstands today! Even Dave Silva--to whom we bid a fond adieu after 7 years as the small press' reigning king--says, "If you like *Horror Show*, you'll love *Cemetery Dance*!" And he should know best, right?

But *why* are Mr. Silva and the luminaries quoted above so excited about *Cemetery Dance*? The reasons are simple: Upcoming issues of *CD* include fiction by Joe R. Lansdale, Steve Rasnic Tem, Thomas F. Monteleone, and William Relling Jr.. Plus a brand new interview with Richard Christian Matheson, his first in 2 years! Additionally, each new issue of *CD* showcases the unique talents of a featured artist, and includes more pages and more features than any two genre magazines combined!

With *Twilight Zone* gone and, sadly, *Horror Show* soon to follow, you really can't afford to miss out on *Cemetery Dance*, where the dead rise up to rejoice with the living!

***Cemetery Dance*, P.O. Box 189, Riverdale, MD 20737**

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WORDS FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome back readers! I hope you enjoy this William Relling Jr. & Steve Rasnic Tem Special Issue!

First things first—CEMETERY DANCE will be changing addresses sometime near the end of this summer, so keep an eye out in SCAVENGER'S NEWSLETTER for news and updates—we don't want to lose anyone.

Next, I want to thank all of CD's subscribers and supporters. With the death of TWILIGHT ZONE and news of THE HORROR SHOW's discontinuation, it becomes even more important to provide a top-quality horror outlet for both readers and writers. I hope you plan to stay around for a while, because CEMETERY DANCE will be around for a long time. You can bet on it!

So, what's new with the magazine. Check it out: I want to welcome our first contributing editor, Chris B. Lacher. His interview with William Relling Jr. appears in this issue, and his regular column will begin with the next issue. Also, a warm welcome to Alfred Klosterman, our new Graphics Editor. His expertise, creativity and attention to detail will surely help CEMETERY DANCE to become one of the top publications in the genre. Starting in January with CD#3—the R.C. Matheson Special—we will begin publishing on a regular quarterly schedule. We plan to add unique features with each issue, including color covers, more artwork, more interviews with top pros and hot up-and-comers, novel excerpts, a regular non-fiction column by Chris Lacher (editor of NEW BLOOD Magazine), and much, much more.

CD#4 (next spring) is the highly anticipated ALL-PRO Anthology. This special edition (a collector's item, no doubt) will include fiction,

interviews and photos of the best in the horror genre—Joe Lansdale, J.N. Williamson, Thomas Monteleone, Al Sarrantonio, Janet Fox, David Silva, Kevin Anderson, William Relling Jr, Bentley Little, Jeannette Hopper, Brian Hodge, and a few surprise "guests." (Look for contest news in SCAVENGER'S on how you can appear in this issue too; I'm saving one story slot for the winner)! Also, look for a J.N. Williamson Special issue sometime next year, complete with the most in-depth interview you will find anywhere.

A few very important odds-and-ends: Tom Elliott's debut novel THE DWELLING was recently released by St. Martin's Press (See ad). Buy this book if you crave a good, chilling read!!! You will not be disappointed. Next, look for Bentley Little's debut novel sometime soon, also from St. Martin's, and Ronald Kelly's HINDSIGHT (mid-December from Zebra). And, finally, check out CLAWHAMMER (released soon from Pinnacle), by Paul Dale Anderson, another fine writer.

Finally, I extend my heartfelt thanks to Bill Relling, Steve Rasnic Tem and Alfred Klosterman for contributing to this issue. These three men give new meaning to the word "professional." Bill and Steve are among the best in the business, and I hope this issue showcases their talents as well as they deserve. Alfred was a genuine pleasure to work with: fantastic artwork, helpful suggestions, unlimited patience, and unbelievably fast work. What more could I ask for?

This issue is dedicated to the memory of my sister Rita. Her soft laughter and warm smiles will be with us forever.



SAVE THE LAST DANCE FOR ME

NORMAN PARTRIDGE is one of the most talented horror writers to emerge from the small-press in years. Look for his next tale of terror—the lead story in George Hatch's long-awaited **NOCTULPA** anthology. Norman lives in Lafayette, California and enjoys reading the works of Joe Lansdale, Chet Williamson, Skipp and Spector, K.W. Jeter and many others. "Save the Last Dance for Me" reads and feels like a dream; or should I say—a nightmare!

I guess the biggest thing that Carl Hort ever did was shoot those people down at radio station KTCB. At least that was the biggest thing I ever saw him do. Anyway, we buried Carl next to Mary Lyn McCarthy last week, and yesterday KTCB knuckled under to Reverend Tim and changed the format of its midnight-to-six show. I keep requesting "Save the Last Dance for Me," but the chickenshit disc jockeys won't play it anymore.

Holding Carl in minimum security was a big mistake. He escaped ten days ago, on Mary Lyn's birthday, just like I said he would. The chuckleheads up in Fresno didn't even know that Carl was gone when he rammed his '57 Chevy into the Fiddler 7-11 and died with a ton of red and green cinder blocks in his lap. Mr. McCarthy said that someone must have jammed a few of those blocks up under Carl's rib cage with how heavy his coffin was and all, and I don't disagree. My shoulder is still sore from carrying that big metal box.

It rained a little the day of the funeral, just enough to kill the dust around the cemetery and make everything look a little cleaner. Reverend Tim didn't seem to know what to say about Carl. First he had Mr. McCarthy say something, and then Tim managed a few words about fate and love in that deep, John Carradine baritone of his. Sherry, Mary Lyn's niece, busted down in tears. I damn near lost hold of the coffin when I saw that.

It was a damn shame, Sherry seeing all that death so young. Everyone said so.

Carl's Chevy sat in the 7-11 parking lot

for a couple of days, full of bloodstained comic books and those pantyhose that come in plastic eggs. Some 7-11 big shots came out in a Cadillac and looked over the store, but that was just for show. Fiddler ain't exactly the best place for a chain store; most people around here are loyal to Millie's Liquors when it comes to buying cigarettes, chewing tobacco, and beer. They'd rather let someone they know gouge them than pay an extra buck to some outsider who gets pissed off if he's got to make change. I can't blame 'em—I hate to get cussed out in Vietnamese myself. Anyway, the 7-11 people have been looking for an excuse to close down their Fiddler store for years, and Carl finally gave them one. Now you can't get a slurpee around here anymore, and you've got to drive to Fresno or Bakersfield to buy *Dark Mistress Magazine* because Millie won't carry it. She says carrying *Hustler* is bad enough.

Anyhow, I was going to tell you about Carl's Chevy. If you want to know the truth, the Chevy was in worse shape than Carl after the accident. The 185-horsepower engine was all bashed up, the frame was bent, the heavily waxed, iron-blue paint-job was scarred and rutted. About the only thing that wasn't scratched or dented was the rear license plate, and the only reason I decided to keep that was because it said **MARYLYN**. I didn't feel funny about keeping it — hell, I was supposed to inherit the whole damned car.

Dennis Wichita down at the junkyard gave me a hundred bucks for the Chevy. Out of respect for Carl, he didn't charge me for the tow.

I was walking out by the cemetery when Dennis hauled the Chevy down Highway 63. The sun had just dipped below the horizon, everything was kind of purple, and it was so quiet. After Dennis pulled out of view, I jumped a ditch filled with hamburger wrappers and beer bottles and went down the road. Little bits of the Chevy's windshield dotted the blacktop, reflecting purple sky. I followed the glimmering trail for miles, until it petered out and

ended by the McCarthy's almond orchard. There's only so much broken glass can come out of one Chevy, I guess.

Folks around here say that it's over, but I don't think so.

The night it happened Carl and me and half the guys from the tire factory were down at the Iron Horse to watch the Mike Tyson fight. Bill, the owner and bartender, has a satellite dish that can pick up just about anything you'd want to see; I think he's single-handedly responsible for keeping HBO out of Fiddler. Anyway, Iron Mike chopped his man down in two rounds, and a bunch of drunken Mexicans were hogging the pool tables, so Carl and me settled into a booth for a couple of extra beers.

Must have been more than a couple, though, because I don't remember leaving the Iron Horse—next thing I remember is having a burger down at the Sno-White Drive-in and seeing Sherry drive by in Mary Lyn's old Mustang.

We finished our burgers and headed out Highway 63 toward my place, which is closer to the factory than it is to Fiddler. "Mind if I turn on the radio?" I asked, trying to sound like I didn't care one way or the other.

Carl grunted an okay from behind a Marlboro. "I want you to hear my new speakers. They're Jensons. Just put 'em in this morning."

I twisted a knob and tuned in KTCB. A do-wop song—something by the Platters, I think—was just finishing up. "Sounds good," I said.

A throaty voice drifted out of the speakers. Fact is, the Jensons made it sound like someone was sitting in the back seat of Carl's '57. *"This is your lonely girl, the Dark Mistress, coming to you from midnight to six on KTCB, radio-free Fresno. I hope all my bad boys out there are listening tonight, especially my lovely crying boy. I'll have something special for you in just a few minutes, but first we must do some business."*

Carl shot a bleary glance my way. "Listen to this stuff?"

"Uh huh. Helps me get through the long, lonely nights."

Carl flipped on his brights, pulled across the solid yellow line, and passed a semi. "Ain't this woman kinda sick?" he asked. "I mean, Reverend Tim had a petition against this show. I think he cost KTCB a few sponsors."

I grinned. "If she's sick, KTCB doesn't care. They're making a whole pot of money off

her. Just listen to this ad. We quieted for a minute, listening to the sexy-voiced DJ pitch a series of Dark Mistress videos. Carl blushed at her suggestive come-on. You know the one: *"I love getting into my work, and sometimes it gets into me."*

"See what I mean?" I said, opening a beer. "She buys up all the ad time from midnight to six. That's a lot of money, Carl."

"But Reverend Tim's petition says—"

I swallowed a beer. "Hell, I bet half those old farts who signed Tim's petition are jackin' off to this show right now. Maybe Tiny Timmy is in the church bathroom with a portable radio, hidin' out from Eloise—"

Carl's expression soured. "Jack, I'll have no talk like that in this Chevy."

I just smiled and drank my beer.

The Dark Mistress laughed. *"How's my crying boy tonight? Are you lonely, like I am? I haven't seen you in such a long time. You used to come to me every week. With roses, remember? You'd come to the cemetery and sing our song."*

I recognized the familiar bass intro to *"Save the Last Dance for Me."* So did Carl. He tromped on the brakes and we skidded down Highway 63 just as Ben E. King started singing; while-wailed firestones screamed, beer splashed across the dashboard. "Christ, Carl, you—" I yelled, and the rest of my words were cut off by the blaring horn of the semi coming fast from behind.

Carl's tobacco-stained teeth bit into his lower lip; the Marlboro flipped out of his mouth and landed in a fold in his jeans. I grabbed for the door handle and missed just as the semi hit its brights and shot around us. Demon-red taillights swam through the darkness; wind sucked after the truck, buffeting the Chevy. Carl's big hands didn't move from the steering wheel. His foot slid off the clutch and the Chevy lurched and died.

I started in on him again. "Carl, you crazy bastard, you want to die?"

Tears were in Carl's eyes. Blood ran from his lip. He said, "Yes."

I pulled off my T-shirt and wiped down the dashboard; Carl got rid of the Marlboro and brushed ashes off his jeans. Suddenly the greasy hamburger in my gut didn't feel very good. "Christ, I hope I haven't screwed up your car," I said, just to say something.

Carl twisted the key and the Chevy roared to life. The final notes of "Save the Last Dance for Me" faded out and Carl flipped off the radio.

"Mary Lyn loved that song," he whispered. "She said it was ours. After she died, I used to go up to the cemetery late at night and sing it to her. I'd bring her roses that I stole from Mrs. Castro's garden."

Hell, everyone in Fiddler knew about Mary Lyn and the song. But Carl had never told me about the roses before, or his midnight cemetery visits.

I raised the beer bottle to my lips, but there wasn't even a trickle left. "Jesus," I said. "How do you think the Dark Mistress knew?"

Carl eased off the clutch and the Chevy kicked out. The car notched RPM's Carl shifted, hit the gas and shifted again. We turned onto Old Howard Road, which was (and is) famous for the biggest potholes in Tulare County. I should have told Carl to slow down. Instead, I opened another beer and stared out at the midnight fields. Drinking made my stomach feel a little better, and I reached into the grease-spotted drive-in bag between us and grabbed a handful of cold fries.

Carl took the beer out of my hand and chugged it down. "I got to see Mary Lyn."

Everybody around Fiddler remembers Mary Lyn's funeral. The casket was metal, silvery-pink, and the funeral parlor was so full of roses and carnations and lilies that Reverend Tim took a carload out to those less-fortunate folks at the senior citizen's home in Dinuba. Someone at the wake said that the florists up in Fresno must have made a fortune, but I imagine that the fellow who rented Mary Lyn's Dad the white, horse-drawn hearse made a good bit more. A lot of folks whispered that Mr. McCarthy was turning Mary Lyn's funeral into a circus, but he just said that his daughter was too special to go to the grave in a black limousine.

He was right. I remember Mary Lyn in that silvery-pink coffin, yellow velvet all around her. Her blond hair was just so, curling like she like it to, and her skin was so white. White like the ivory cross on Father Tim's pulpit.

I know I shouldn't say it, but they should have left Mary Lyn's eyes open. Her eyes were so blue and pretty. I don't know what they'd remind you of—it sure wouldn't be anything you'd find in a place like Fiddler. And they really did sparkle, especially when Mary Lyn was enjoying herself.

I never told Carl about this, I used to

borrow my cousin's pickup and follow Carl and Mary Lyn. Usually they went to the drive-in outside Visalia, which is closed down now. I'd park a couple of rows behind Carl's Chevy and get some popcorn. Then I'd watch them. I usually left before they did, and every now and then when I hit my lights I'd catch the glint of Mary Lyn's eyes through the Chevy's back window as she rested her head on Carl's shoulder. And that's how I remember her: sparkling eyes in the dark.

I remember staring down at Mary Lyn in her coffin, thinking that the pink ribbon tied around her neck wasn't quite wide enough. Maybe it was just me. Most folks said that they couldn't see the rope burns at all.

In the moonlight, Carl looked like a man made of shadows as he sprinted away from Mrs. Castro's garden. He flung open the car door and his sweaty white face came toward me; droplets of blood splattered against my naked chest as Carl flung roses into the back seat.

The car door slammed. I grabbed one of Carl's big paws and held it up to the radio light. Jagged, bloody ribs criss-crossed his lifeline. "Didn't have no shears," he said. "I had to rip 'em loose."

I didn't know what to say. I was quiet all the way to the cemetery. Carl hit damn near every pothole and didn't even cringe.

A rusty road-sign bobbed in the darkness. FIDDLER CEMETERY.

"Comin'?" Carl asked, collecting the roses with bloody hands.

"She's dead, Carl," I whispered. "Take me home. I don't want to see this."

Carl squeezed the rose stems. His eyes narrowed. "You don't want to see nothin', you just don't watch, then."

Slam. Carl was out of the Chevy. Slam. In and out of the trunk. He loped into the darkness, roses in one hand, something else in the other.

I sucked down the last drops of the last beer. Damn. First time that I could remember Carl not listening to me. He always listened, even in high school. If I dropped three fingers, he threw a slider. If I dropped my pinky: fastball to a left-handed batter.

I rolled down my window. Somewhere, a high keening voice, breaking with emotion. Carl singing "Save the Last Dance for Me."

Shit. Why couldn't I be at home? A couple more beers there, nice and cold. A Dark Mistress video. The one with her in that little black leather outfit; you know, nasty little



"Jeter's writing is impressive, intense, vivid, and unflinchingly honest."

—RAMSEY CAMPBELL

"IN THE LAND OF THE DEAD is so powerful, it's numbing. Jeter's prose is lean as a scalpel and cuts to the bone."

—JOE LANSDALE



IN THE LAND OF THE DEAD **By K.W. Jeter**

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leather strips, full of holes and tight like you can hardly believe. Makes her look like she sprang off the cover of some kinky science fiction paperback. Wearing that leather mask that never comes off. Blond hair spilling around it; web around a black widow's ass.

Hell, you know the feeling. Only real D.M. fans like you and me understand how you get addicted to that kind of stuff, right?

Outside, a shovel bit onto the cemetery lawn. I listened. The shovel bit again. Then I was out of the Chevy and screaming, "Carl!"

I guess not many people know that I was the first one to see Mary Lyn that morning. Mr. McCarthy had hired me and Carl to work on farm equipment that summer, only Carl decided that he couldn't keep the job because he was afraid he'd get his pitching hand caught in some machine. Besides, he didn't feel right about taking money from Mary Lyn's Dad.

It was Saturday morning, not quite light and already hot like it gets in August. I opened the barn door and saw those blue eyes hanging in the shadows, heard the rope twisting. I tripped over the fallen ladder. I had to look, and then it seemed like I couldn't stop looking.

Mrs. McCarthy broke down when I told her. Mr. McCarthy wanted to cut Mary Lyn

down, but I said we'd better wait for the sheriff.

They never did find a suicide note, and I guess that's why Mr. McCarthy still says it was murder. The sheriff didn't agree. When he found that broken 45 on the record player in the loft, he was sure that he had found Mary Lyn's final message. The sheriff went straight to Carl.

Of course, the sheriff's guess was right. "Save the Last Dance for Me" was Carl and Mary Lyn's song. And that's what was on the broken 45.

I tackled Carl and knocked the wind out of him. The shovel went one way, we went the other, and before we hit the grass Carl's head came down hard against Mary Lyn's tombstone.

Took nearly five minutes for him to come around. I was trying to imagine what prison would be like when he shook his head and tried to sit up.

"Just a minute, buddy," I said, holding Carl down. I could feel a bloody goose-egg rising on the side of his head just above his ear. "You'd better sit still until—"

Carl sobbed. "Damn you, Jack. I gotta see Mary Lyn. I heard her on the radio! You did too!"

A car skidded around an axle-buster out on Howard Road. I lay down next to Carl and the headlights passed over us. When the car was gone, I said, "I heard the Dark Mistress, not Mary Lyn. Someone we know must be playing a joke. A real sick joke."

Carl rolled over onto his belly and yanked a handful of grass from Mary Lyn's grave. He buried his head in his arms. For a minute I thought that he had passed out, but then he said, "Why'd you leave, Mary Lyn? Didn't you know you'd take everything away?"

He sat up and stared at me, his face shiny with blood and tears, his eyes wild and unfocused. "Take the shovel, Jack," he said. "Dig me a grave. I been dead for years, can't you see?"

I reached for him and he batted my hand away. There wasn't any stopping him now. "She took it all away—the wedding, the kids, the baseball—all of it. Without her, I just couldn't do nothing. I didn't have the confidence, didn't have none of her strength, didn't even want to try. It would have been like trying to pitch without you catching for me."

I smiled at that last thing, though I don't know how. "You could have kept pitching," I said, hoping I could get him talking about something besides Mary Lyn. "I you would have signed that Triple A contract like you should have, folks around here would be sayin', 'That Seaver boy from Fresno was good, but let me tell you about Carl Hart from Fiddler—'"

"How could I sign? Mary Lyn dead half a year . . . everyone looking at me like I was some kind of ghost, like her death was my fault—"

"But you could have left Fiddler."

"Could have. Should have. Those are terrible words, Jack." Carl wiped blood out of his eyes. "No, I could never leave Mary Lyn. I'd never go anywhere without her. This damn town stole her from me." He laughed: a hard, bitter sound. "You want to know the truth? They never wanted to let her leave. Didn't you see her parents whispering to each other at the wake? Like they were happy that she'd never change? Like they were relieved somehow?"

"Carl, that's crazy talk."

He didn't even hear me. "Mary Lyn would always be that perfect girl from Fiddler who everyone could worship. She'd never get fat or old, never get wrinkled, never leave." His head sank forward and he blinked back tears. "But they'll have to put up with me forever. I'm a ghost, Jack. As long as I'm here, even when I'm old, they'll look at me and see Mary Lyn."

Carl wobbled to his feet; he stood big and

bloody, black sky and bright stars around his head. "Now they want to drive me away." He laughed and threw the shovel into the darkness. "Almost did, didn't they, buddy? But it ain't so easy. Take more than some crazy bitch playin' around on the radio to get rid of Carl Hart. Someone's gonna learn that tonight, that's for damn sure."

I remember the rest of it kinda blurry, and Reverend Tim says that's probably for the best. I remember the clump of graveyard grass that Carl set on the dashboard, the Chevy hitting potholes, and then Carl cussing the headlights on 180. I remember wishing that I had another beer.

Gray outskirts of Fresno . . . tall black radio transmitter with a single red light . . . buzzing sound like ten million fireflies and Carl slipping a key into the locked trunk, reaching for his shotgun . . . empty hallways in the unlocked building . . . the smell of floor wax . . . following Carl . . . the Mexican women in black jeans and a black KTCB T-shirt and her familiar blue eyes . . . Carl smiling, grass stains on his knees . . . shotgun pellets turning her T-shirt red while she screams Spanish . . . Carl's words and then a fat technician shouting, "Christ, she's only the janitor," and Carl lets him have it too, the fat guy lurching against a desk, scattering glazed donuts and spilling coffee . . . and then Mary Lyn's voice coming from the speakers . . . *I love getting into my work, and sometimes it gets into me* . . . Carl screaming laughter now as he pulls a cassette out of some machine and the Dark Mistress's voice gone and the song gone and Carl laughing at the dead air . . .

I was looking at *Hustler* up in the barn loft the first time it happened.

"I see you," Mary Lyn said, peeking over the top rung of the ladder.

I tossed the magazine away and stared into those sparkling blue eyes. Dead quiet in the barn. Both of us eighteen, scared. Mary Lyn waiting.

"Course you see me," I said. "I'm right here. You see me damn near every day."

Mary Lyn came off the ladder. Her bare feet padded across the rough wooden floor. "I mean I see you at the drive-in. I see you watching me and Carl." She ran a thumb across her stomach and hooked it under the top button of her Levi cut-offs.

I laughed and she came closer. I said, "I never—"

Mary Lyn picked up the magazine and flipped through it. Her eyes widened. Sparkled. "Why, Jack, you're a bad boy. No wonder the girls stay away from you." She laughed. "You lonely? Is that why you like these magazines? That why you like to watch?"

"No, it isn't like that. I just like to dream about how things might be."

Sparkle. Mary Lyn dropped the magazine. Her white fingers unbuttoned her loose blue work-shirt. She came closer. I undid her cut-offs, kissed her blond curls. "Show me your dreams, Jack," she whispered, "and I'll show you mine."

It would have been fine that way. We could have had our own separate world, one little spot where we could be like we wanted. We could have done everything. Trouble was, after awhile Mary Lyn wasn't like my dreams at all. And then she started talking about bringing Carl into it. She should have left things alone. It could have been so wonderful.

Could have. Should have. Those are terrible words...

Funny how it ended. I remember it was a quiet August night. You could hear the old windmill down by the almond orchard sighing in the breeze; you could smell the heat, even at midnight.

Sparkle. Nothing blue like that anywhere in Fiddler. Mary Lyn laughed. She thought the rope was part of some new dream.

I've got an uncle up in Sacramento who's been after me to move north for years. He's got arthritis and wants me to take over his body and

fender shop. Last night I talked it over with Sherry and we decided that it wasn't such a bad idea. We don't care anymore if people find out about us — we're leaving Fiddler for sure — but we're just sorry that we won't be around when folks find out that an eighteen-year-old cheerleader has run off with a guy who's been cashing paychecks from the tire factory for fifteen years.

Sherry's gonna be just fine. She doesn't have one single dream rattling around in her cute little head. Course, I won't ever be able to tell her things like I could with Mary Lyn. I'll never look up from my mornin' coffee and say, "Hey, babe, I ever mention those cinder blocks I put in Carl's coffin? I ever tell you about the things I like to do with his head?"

But Sherry's not the real reason I'm leaving. And it's not because KTCB replaced the Dark Mistress with tapes of Reverend Tim and his pals, either. See, the last two nights after I finished my shift, I was followed home by a iron-blue '57 Chevy. Damn thing chewed my tail all the way up Highway 63. And tonight, flipping around the dial while I was waiting for Sherry out in the McCarthy's almond orchard, I heard a woman's voice on KTCB after midnight.

She sounded a lot like Mary Lyn; she sounded a lot like the Dark Mistress. I wrote down the name and frequency of the Sacramento radio station she told me about.

She said that I should avoid working on '57 Chevys, and then she played the song I've been wanting to hear: "Save the Last Dance for Me."

It was a request from someone named Carl.

FORESHADOWS

PORTENTS #7 A NEW CONCEPT IN HORROR...

DARK FICTION

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DEBBIE SILAS
MARK RAINY
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BENTLEY LITTLE
RICHARD MCGONEGAL
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IN LOVING MEMORY

STEVE VERNON is a talented new horror writer from Halifax, Nova Scotia. He has sold his fiction to a number of horror publications, including AFTER HOURS, OCTOBER DREAMS, GAS, TERROR TIME AGAIN, and THE HORROR SHOW (Winter 1988). He lives with his wife of eight years and their five-year-old daughter. "In Loving Memory's" razor-sharp prose details a lonely man's journey into madness.

WALKER HARRISON CROUCH

The old burial ground sits in the bottom of a natural hollow, surrounded by steep hills. Only a score of graves remain, the rest have been moved due to drainage problems. His house lay on the other side of the hill. He has walked this way many times. By day it is a pleasant shortcut, but by night the journey can be endless.

SKINNER DEMONE MOSSMAN

There is no moon tonight, and the few stars that dare peek through the heavy clouds soon hide their eyes. The wind brings low whistling warnings of a storm soon to come. He walks head down, hands in pockets. She has left him for another. He is heading home to an empty house, a bottle, and perhaps a razor. He has chosen the shortcut home, the graveyard.

OXNER LOGAN HURST

It is dark, and each step leads him into a black empty void, yawning hungrily before him. The only landmarks are the pale white tombstones, squatting in scattered rows, like jagged teeth in an old man's skull.

NAYLOR MORTON BLACKWELL

Through some trick of the night the names on the stones seem to leap out at him. He slows, walking carefully, trying to read the inscriptions.



The dates reach far back into the past. The inscriptions are old and worn, and he must kneel to decipher some of the markers. He does not mind. Suddenly, there is no need for haste. Thunder rumbles above him, but he pays it no heed.

?????????

Here is a stone worn almost smooth. The name and the date are gone, lost to time's hungry grasp. All that remains is the epitaph, three lines which must have been carved deeper than the other inscriptions.

GON B T N FO GOT EN

Gone but not forgotten. But who will remember a century old grave, when even the stone has forgotten? Who will kneel and weep over the bones? Who will remember? Who lies here, alone and unloved?

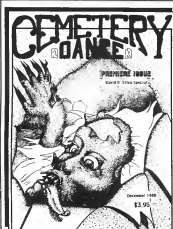
G N E T G D

Gone to god. And now God weeps, great tears of rain crashing down upon the anonymous grave. A bolt of lightning sunder the night and shatters the stone. Nothing remains save the final two words in the epitaph.

The rumble of thunder rings like laughter in his ears. Sobs are torn from his throat, and tears flow as he reads the final two words. The ground he kneels upon softens beneath the weight of the downpour. He calls out in the night, clawing at the sod, suddenly hungry for the earth below.

A soundless whisper answers him. Soft, muted, a tongue long gone to dust welcomes him. Bony limbs, blackened with age, burst from their resting place. They embrace him, and he feels the earth part beneath him. He welcomes their grasp, and struggles toward a mutual sanctuary. He smiles, laughs, as the loosened soil washes over him. The taste of graveyard dirt is sweet in his mouth, and eternity does not seem so very long.

GO E HOM



Dance a Cemetery Dance with Joe R. Lansdale, Richard Christian Matheson, Thomas F. Monteleone, William Relling Jr., David B. Silva, and Steve Rasnic Tem . . .

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THE SANCTUARY

BENTLEY LITTLE is the hottest young writer in horror today! Look for big, big things from this guy! His short fiction has already appeared in NIGHT CRY, THE HORROR SHOW, CAVALIER, NEW BLOOD, ZAM, NIGHTMARES, ELDRITCH TALES, and dozens of other publications. His first novel—the plot is still a secret—will be released shortly by St. Martin's Press. Look for Bentley's next story in CEMETERY DANCE #4—the All-Pro Anthology. The following tale, "The Sanctuary," manages to break every rule and touch on every taboo in the genre. It will chill you, it will certainly disturb you; as always, Bentley Little delivers the goods.

The drapes were all closed, Cal noticed as he came home after school, and he knew even before walking up the porch steps that something terrible had happened. The drapes hadn't been closed in the daytime since . . . since Father had had to pay.

He shifted the schoolbooks under his arms, licking his dry lips before opening the front door. Inside, the living room was dark, the heavy brown drapes effectively keeping out all but the most diffused light. He almost didn't see his mother curled up in a corner of the couch. "Mother?" he said nervously.

She didn't answer, and he walked over to where she was sitting, placing his books on the coffee table. This close, he could see the wetness of tears on her cheeks. "Mother?"

She leaped up and grabbed him by the shoulders, dragging him close, pressing him against her bulk. He could smell on her house dress an unfamiliar odor he did not like. "Oh Cal," she sobbed. "I didn't mean to do it! I didn't mean to!"

Cal noticed suddenly that the house was silent. There were no noises coming from the back of the house, and he had a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Where's Chrissie?" he asked.

Her hands clutched tighter, hugging him. "I couldn't help myself," she wailed. Tears were rolling down her puffy cheeks. "I had to kill him."

"Kill who?" Cal asked, fighting back his

fear. "Who did you kill?"

"I was walking home from the store, and I saw this man walking his dog, and The Rage came over me. I couldn't help myself."

"What happened?"

"I . . . I told him my car wouldn't start, and I had him come into the garage with me to see if he could figure out what was wrong. Then I closed the door, and I used the ax. I . . . I couldn't help myself. I didn't think I'd do it again, I didn't want to do it again, but The Rage came over me." She ran a hand through Cal's hair, and her voice was suddenly free of emotion. "I sinned," she said. "But it was not my fault."

"Where's Chrissie?" Cal demanded.

"Chrissie had to die for my sins."

Cal pulled away from his mother and ran down the hallway, through the back bedroom, to The Sanctuary. There, next to Father's cross, was the crucified form of his sister. She was naked, spreadeagled, her hands and feet nailed to the wood, her head hanging limply down.

"Chrissie?" he said.

She did not move, did not reply, but when he hesitantly touched her foot, the skin was still warm.

Behind him, he heard the door to The Sanctuary close. The only light in the windowless room came from the candles flickering in front of the altar. As Cal stared at the unmoving form of his sister, at the small streams of blood which flowed from her impaled hands and feet, his mother's strong hands grasped his shoulders. "She will be resurrected," his mother said, and when he turned he saw the tears in her eyes. "She will be resurrected and will sit at the throne of God and we will pray to her and worship her as we do your father."

She dropped to her knees beside him and gestured for him to join her. He saw faint red traces in the lines which criss-crossed her palm. Her lifeline, he noticed, was totally obscured with a thin smear of blood. "Pray," she begged. She folded her hands in a gesture of supplication.

Cal knelt down before his father's cross and folded his hands in prayer.

"Dear Jim," his mother said. "Hallowed be your name. We thank you for protecting and providing for this, your household. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. We beseech thee, O Jim, to keep us safe from harm. You are great, you are good, and we thank you for our food. Amen."

Cal knew his mother's prayers were not exactly right. He remembered some of what he had learned in Sunday School, when they used to go to church, and he could tell that her entreaties were a little off. But he said nothing. If he did speak up, she would only scourge him until he repented of his blasphemy and then make him kneel for hours praying to his father, so he kept his mouth shut.

His mother was muttering next to him, reciting a private prayer, and though he knew he was expected to do the same, he glanced around The Sanctuary instead. Below Chrissie's hands and feet were the sacred bowls used to catch her martyred blood. They would drink it later for Communion, and Cal grimaced at the thought. Already he could taste the sickening salty herbal flavor of the blood, and it made him want to vomit. In the corner of the room, bathed in a swath of shadow not penetrated by the candlelight, he could see the outline of the bloody ax leaning against the wall. On the floor in front of the ax was the hammer she had used to crucify Chrissie, and next to the hammer were scattered extra nails.

His mother stood. "You may leave," she said. "I want to be alone right now."

He nodded silently and left The Sanctuary. He wanted to cry, but could not, and instead he sat at the kitchen table and stared blankly into space. Bocephus scratched on the door, and he let the dog inside, feeding him on the kitchen floor. The shadows lengthened, the sun set, and still his mother did not come out. He made himself a sandwich, drank some milk and after watching a sitcom on television, went into his bedroom. He was tired but found himself unable to fall asleep. He turned on the small black and white television on the dresser. He needed company.

Sometime later, he heard his mother's footsteps and the rustle of her clothes as she emerged from The Sanctuary and went directly to her bedroom. Through the thin wall, he heard her praying, her hoarse voice rising and falling in rhythmic oratorical cadences.

Bocephus came into his room and jumped on the bed, tail wagging, tongue hanging happily out. Cal pulled the dog close and buried his face

in the clean golden fur, hugging the pet to him. Hot tears spilled from his eyes and he wiped them on the dog's soft hair. "Chrissie," he said. "Chrissie."

The house was silent. Sometime after he had fallen asleep, his mother had come in and turned off the television, and now it was so quiet that he could hear his mother's deep, even breathing in the next room, punctuated by an occasional snore. He stared up into the blackness, thinking about his mother, about The Rage, about Chrissie, and about what he should do. He stared up into blackness . . .

. . . and heard Chrissie's soft whisper.

"Cal."

A wash of goosebumps arose on his skin as a wave of coldness swept over him. He closed his eyes, pulling the blanket up over his head. His heart was hammering in his chest. He was imagining it. He had to be.

"Cal."

The whisper was clear, only slightly louder than his mother's sleepbreathing.

"Cal."

He wanted to scream, but his mouth was suddenly dry. He plugged his ears with his fingers and shut his eyes tightly, but though he could not hear Chrissie's whisper, his mind filled the sound in for him and he knew that if he lifted his fingers from his ears he would hear the voice again.

"Cal."

What did she want? He thought of Chrissie's crucified body, nails driven through hands and feet, her head hanging limply down, an expression of lonely terror frozen on her face, and suddenly he was no longer afraid. Or not as afraid. He was still a little scared, but the fear was tempered with sadness and sympathy. She was his sister, she had been killed to pay for their mother's sins, and now she was alone, all alone in The Sanctuary with father.

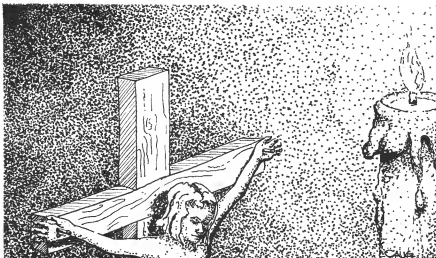
She had always been afraid of The Sanctuary.

She had always been afraid of father.

He unplugged his ears and pulled the blanket from his head.

"Cal."

The whisper was not malevolently beckoning to him as he had originally thought. It sounded more like a plea, a plea for help. He slipped out of bed, careful not to make any noise. He walked slowly down the hall, past his mother's room, through the back bedroom to The Sanctuary.



He looked around the darkened room. Only one candle was still flickering, and like the others it was almost worn down. He could see, however, that the pewter bowls at the foot of the cross were full again, and the man mother had murdered was now shards of bone, blackened and unrecognizable. A faint haze of smoke still hung over the room.

"Cal," Chrissie whispered.

He looked up.

"Kill her," Chrissie said. "Kill the bitch."

He went to school the next day as if nothing had happened, but reading and spelling went in one ear and out the other, and he could concentrate neither on history nor math. His mind was on his mother. Part of him knew that he should tell someone what had happened, but part of him did not want to tell. Besides, who would he talk to? Miss Price did not particularly like him and he wouldn't feel comfortable telling her what had happened, and he would feel even more awkward talking to the principal, whom he had only seen a few times striding across the playground toward his office. He should go to the police, he knew. That was who would really want to know. But then they would take his mother away, and they would take father and Chrissie away, and he would be all alone.

Besides, he was afraid of what his father might do. Father's wrath was great, and he had the power of God on his side. And what could policemen do against the power of God?

At lunch, on the playground, Cal stood alone, sometimes wanting to tell someone about his mother, sometimes not.

He did not even consider Chrissie's option.

He walked home slowly after school, taking his time, thinking. His mother would be praying in The Sanctuary—that was what she had done the last time The Rage came over her and father had had to pay—and he didn't want to join her. He still wasn't sure what he wanted. His muscles were tense, he had a bad headache and he felt trapped.

He walked down the street toward his house and stopped in surprise. His mother was not in The Sanctuary. Instead, she stood on the front lawn, hose in hand, watering the green lawn and the bed of flowers which grew beneath the kitchen window. The street was filled with the noise of out-of-school kids, playing games in their yards, riding up and down the sidewalks on bikes and Big Wheels. Further up the street, Mr. Johnson was mowing the lawn, the gas-powered engine a constant buzz underneath the more random noises of the kids.

Cal walked slowly forward, watching his mother. She glanced over at him and smiled, and then a change came over her face. Her eyes widened as if in fear, and the corners of her

mouth flattened out. Her entire body took on a rigid robotic stance.

The Rage, he thought, panicking.

And then she dropped the hose and was running down the sidewalk. He ran after her, but she was already talking to a boy he didn't know, a kid from some other street. The boy nodded, then pushed his bike alongside him as both of them headed back up the sidewalk. Cal stood lamely in front of them, not knowing what to do.

His mother shot him an unreadable look as she passed, a look filled simultaneously with tortured agony and malicious glee.

"Mother!" he cried, running behind her.

She turned, smiling, and slapped him hard across the face.

As he fell to the ground, he saw his mother lead the boy into the garage.

He jumped to his feet and followed them through the small garage door. The boy was standing in the middle of the room, looking around, confused. "Where is it?" he asked.

Cal heard the boy's chin hit the cement as his mother pushed him to the floor.

"NO!" Cal yelled.

The boy was too stunned to cry, and he merely looked up in blank confusion as the shovel slammed into his back. He flopped around on the concrete floor like a fish, blood streaming from the long slice where the shovel dug into his back.

Cal staggered out of the garage, but he could hear the sickening squelching sound of the shovel chopping into flesh with short quick bites.

And then his mother ran out, her hands bloody, a look of abject terror on her face.

Cal cringed, but she dashed past him, rushing around the side of the garage. He saw her take from the sideyard two long eight-by-fours. She dragged the boards to the back of the house, and he heard the slow regular sound of wood being sawed. He stood there unmoving. The sawing stopped a few minutes later, and he heard the irregular whipcrack of hammer against nail.

She was constructing a cross.

He wanted to leave, to run, but something held him back. He stood, then sat, alone in the front of the house as around him neighborhood life went on as normal, listening to the sound of the hammer. He was still sitting there when he heard the back door slam and saw through the front windows of the house his mother carrying the cross down the hall to The Sanctuary.

It hit him then, what was going to happen to him, and he quickly jumped to his feet. He was not going to let her have him. He would run if necessary, fight if he had to.

Bocephus barked once, loudly, a short harsh yelp which was immediately cut off.

Then there was silence.

"Bocephus!" Cal yelled. He ran into the house, down the hall.

The dog was already splayed on the cross, all four legs stretched in a pose of crucifixion, long nails protruding from his paws.

His mother dropped the hammer, and fell to her knees. There were tears rolling down her cheeks, but she was not sobbing. She began to pray. "Bless this house, bless our feet, good food, good meat, good God, let's eat. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the peacemakers. In the name of the Father, the Daughter, and the Holy Dog, Amen." She genuflected first toward father, then toward Chrissie, then toward Bocephus.

Cal remained standing. She was gone, for gone, crazy, and he realized now that the only option open to him was to contact the authorities and turn her in. His insides felt stiff and sore and he had a pounding headache. Father might think his decision blasphemous, but Chrissie probably would not, and she sat at God's side as well.

His mother left The Sanctuary and returned a few moments later, dragging the boy's mutilated body. She threw it into the pit and set it afire. Though the fan was on, The Sanctuary was filled with a black, foul-smelling smoke, and Cal staggered into the bedroom, taking huge gulps of the fresh air. In his head he could hear the maddening drip drip drip of the blood into the altar bowl.

Maybe he should kill her.

"Cal."

Chrissie's voice, still little more than a whisper, sounded clear and smooth through the smoke and din. He wanted to go back into The Sanctuary and talk to her but could not bring himself to do it.

"No," Chrissie whispered, and she said the word again. "Nooooo."

No? What did that mean?

But he knew what it meant. Chrissie had changed her mind. Maybe she had talked to her father, maybe she had talked to God, but she no longer wanted him to kill their mother, and she obviously did not want him to turn their mother in.

But what could he do?

"No," Chrissie whispered.

He ran out of the house and dropped onto the grass of the lawn outside, the cool wet grass which felt so fresh and new beneath his hot cheek.

Todd MacVicar from down the street rolled by on his Big Wheel. "What's the matter with you?" he said. His voice was filled with disgust.

And Cal felt The Rage come over him. He knew it was happening, and he didn't want it to happen, but an unbridled hatred of Todd filled him from within, and he knew that nothing would abate this anger and hate save the boy's death. Thoughts of Todd's head, bloodied and smashed on the sidewalk, brought to his voice the coolness he needed. "Come here," he said. "I want to show you something in the garage."

He hoped his mother had not disposed of the shovel.

Cal stood in the center of The Sanctuary. He was crying, filled with a sadness and remorse he didn't know he could experience. Behind him, Todd MacVicar's body burned in the pit, and he thought the smoke felt clean, pure.

He looked down at his mother.

"You have no choice," she sobbed. "I

must pay. I must die for your sins." She stretched a trembling hand against the cross-beam, palm outward. Her fingers twitched nervously.

Cal pressed the point of the nail against the lined skin, drawing back the hammer.

The voices in his head offered encouragement:

"You have no choice." His father.

"You must." Chrissie.

He swung the hammer hard and flinched visibly as his mother screamed, the nail impaling her palm to the wood. Warm red blood streamed downward.

This was crazy, he thought. This was wrong. This wasn't what he was supposed to do. But as he looked up, he thought he saw approval in Chrissie's running clouded eyes, in his father's dry empty sockets.

He swung the hammer again.

And again.

By the time he finished the last foot and propped the cross up next to Bocephus, he was already feeling better, purified, cleansed, as if he was an innocent newborn, free from all guilt.

He sank gratefully to his knees.

"Our mother," he said, "who art in heaven . . ."

DON'T MISS THESE UPCOMING



There are still delights to be found in *The Horror Show* and we don't want you to miss a single one. Coming up in this summer's issue is a special Rising Stars second edition. This time our special guests will include Paul F. Olson, Brian Hodge, G.L. Raison, and Susan M. Watkins. Two stories by each author, plus an interview so you can get a chance to know this rising stars a little better. Then in the spring of 1990, we will be putting together our first double-issue, with twice the fiction and twice the good reading. It's certain to be the best issue of *The Horror Show* you've yet to read. Make sure you don't miss either one of these upcoming jewels. You can order them individually or as a final subscription package.

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ISSUES OF THE HORROR SHOW

A CONVERSATION WITH WILLIAM RELLING JR.

Interview conducted by Chris B. Lacher



WILLIAM RELLING JR. is thirty-five years old and has been living in the Los Angeles area since 1978. He is the author of the novels Brujo and New Moon. His first collection of short stories, The Infinite Man, will be released this summer by Scream/Press. Relling's "Four-In-Hand" (page 22) and "Night Game" (page 59) appear in this issue!

NOTE: The interview you are about to read is based on actual court transcripts and documented personal accounts. Please, if you have small children, make them leave the area immediately.

CEMETERY DANCE: Since most interviews conclude with a question about future projects, let's be wild and begin by asking what's upcoming from William Relling Jr.

RELLING: The big thing is my Scream/Press book, *The Infinite Men*. That'll be out later this summer or early in the fall. Harry Morris is doing the pictures for it—I've seen the first illustration and it cracked me up, it's very nice. Twenty-one stories, and seven of 'em are unpublished. It's gonna be a cute book.

Then there's the sequel to *New Moon*, which is called *Silent Moon*. That'll be out some time in the spring of 1990. I have a story coming out in *Scare Care* that I'm excited about—the book, not the story. *Graham* (Masterion) did a wonderful thing getting that book together, and I'm proud to be a part of it. I hope it's a big hit. Then there's another novel in the works, *Resurrection Man*, which some people know of as *Azriel*, but I changed the title. I think it's a good book—it's not quite half finished and it's going well. It's set in Santa Cruz and it's a scary story, but it's the first novel I've done that doesn't have a supernatural element in it. Instead it's more reality-based.

CD: A lot of different irons in the fire. How would you categorize your writing? Or do you even want to?

RELLING: I'm not uncomfortable with being called a "thriller" writer. I like that. It's better than being a "horror" writer, I think, because the "horror" label seems so restrictive. I also happen to like guys who stretch out. I

like it when I stretch out. To tell the truth, I don't know anybody who's really comfortable with being labeled a "horror" writer. But each of us is uncomfortable for a different reason. I think that has to do with an individual writer's definition of what "horror" is, and how that definition is different from the definitions that critics and readers come up with when they think of "horror." Labels are tough to deal with. Sometimes you gotta have 'em, though.

CD: You mentioned once some time ago that you were unsure as to how your literary peers perceived your writing. Are you still concerned with that?

RELLING: Yeah, I am. It's not something that I dwell on, though, just something that occurs to me now and again . . .

Let's see . . . who are my peers? (R.C.) Matheson? (David J.) Schow? Joe Lansdale? Skipp and Spector? We're all more or less the same age, and we're doing more or less the same things . . . But those guys sort of hang out together, and while I know 'em all, I'm not really a part of that loop. I suppose there are times when I feel left out, but most of the time I don't really give a shit. I have a different circle of friends, people I spend most of my time with, and very few of them are writers. Some are, but most aren't.

Dave and Joe and Skipp and Spector and those guys seem more into the fandom/convention trip than I am. I'm actually a shy person. I wonder how they regard me, sure, but that's normal, I think. Everybody wants to be liked. Or wants their stuff to be liked.

CD: Set the record straight: Explain to all the Barker-Lockeys that there was life before *Books of Blood*.

RELLING: (Laughs.) I'll tell you guys right now, *HELLRAISER* sucked. *RAWHEAD REX* was bad, too, though Clive was only the writer on that one. And I don't mean to take anything away from Clive, because he's a lovely man and he's worked very, very hard to make himself what he is. He's earned everything he's got, no question about it. I thought it was interesting, though, that he was the only one doing publicity for *HELLRAISER II*. Not the actors or the director or the producer—Clive was the one who went on *Entertainment Tonight* and plugged the movie. He was the star. I thought that was fascinating.

But to get back to the question, the problem with a reader attaching himself or herself to one writer—or one type of writer—is that they're shutting out other writers. There's so much great stuff out there. But ultimately, I suppose, the problem is theirs (the readers). Take Clive—who is not the best writer in the world, but he's better than, say, Salmon Rushdie. People have gone just bat-shit over Clive, which is great for him. But there are lots of other writers out there besides Clive Barker.

The same thing with (Stephen) King. People have always hooked on to stars—writers, artists, actors, musicians, whatever. And I'm a big fan of King, too. But there are other people who are better than he is, other people worth reading. I'm sure he'd be the first to admit it.

The point is, guys like Clive

and King didn't just come out of nowhere. No artist works in a vacuum. I find Clive's imagery very Bosch-like, and I know at one time he wanted to be a playwright, so it'd make sense to me if he were also being imitative of someone like Joe Orton—Orton was another Liverpool lad, wasn't he? And King borrows from a bunch of different sources—the buried-alive-on-the-beach bit from CREEPSHOW, the episode with Ted Danson, came straight from a Travis McGee novel. I'm sure he borrowed it—consciously or not—from John D. MacDonald. He's said a million times what a fan he is of MacDonald. But readers and fans don't realize this. They don't realize there were guys doing this stuff long before any of us came along.

CD: I'm sure you heard about the fan that sliced his wrist open for Clive Barker at a book-signing and asked Barker to sign his books with blood. Do you have any FATAL ATTRACTION stories?

RELLING: That was cute, wasn't it? No, I don't have any wrist-slashing stories. I can't imagine anything I do inspiring something like that. Maybe somebody'll come up to me one of these days and hit himself in the face with a pie, but that's about the worst thing I can imagine happening. (Laughs.) Hell, I've only gotten about a half dozen fan letters, and none was particularly strange. Unfortunately.

CD: You've been involved with script writing and feature film work. What've you been working on lately?

RELLING: A couple of things. I just wrote an episode of

WISEGUY. It's a real departure for me—how many times does a writer say that? "It's a real departure for me." Jeez. Anyway, it's an intensely personal story—there's no physical violence in it at all, but a great deal of emotional violence. I also finished a screenplay version of New Moon, which'd make a great low-budget project. I'd love to see John Carpenter do it with Kurt Russell, that'd be a lot of fun. And I'm working on a feature script right now that's pretty much a straight thriller about a washed-out, street-bum drunk who meets this incredibly gorgeous, wealthy woman who wants to dry him out. It turns out that that guy is an ex-F.B.I. agent and this babe is drying him out because she has a caper she wants to recruit him for, something that demands an expertise he used to have. It's got that kind of grungy, DIE HARD feel—it'd be a great Bruce Willis movie.

CD: Obviously, then, you're not a one-project writer?

RELLING: No, there's always something new popping up that I find myself getting mixed-up with.

CD: What about the fan press? A number of your short stories have appeared in Whispers, The Horror Show, and New Blood to name a few, so you're obviously a supporter. But what's your overall impression of the small press and its participants?

RELLING: It's generally favorable. For one reason, since the market for short stories—horror stories especially—has dried up so much in the last 18 months, the only markets for horror fiction are in the small

press. Another reason is that a lot of small press people seem to put serious effort into what they do. But then you have a lot of others for whom it's a dilettante endeavor . . .

I suppose I'm favorably inclined to small press operations because the first recognition I got—except for the pornos—was from the small press. So I think small press needs to be encouraged. It's a good thing.

CD: Don't you think some of the better publications have too few professional aspirations?

RELLING: But so what? If all they want to achieve is what they've achieved so far, that's fine with me. If it's only a hobby and it works for them, great. Just so they don't have any illusions that they have a greater role in the Great Scheme of Things than they actually have. If they start to feel a little too self-important, that's dangerous.

CD: Do you think organizations like Horror Writers of America and Small Press Writers and Artists Organization are significant?

RELLING: I think that they can be. Right now I belong to neither organization, though I've belonged to both in the past. The problem is that in any kind of organization like these two, you run into a lot of people who think they're more important than they really are. And that always leads to trouble.

CD: Let's get back to the mechanics of writing for a minute. What things, if any, act as inspiration for you?

RELLING: You mean besides

other people's work? Because a lot of what I do is a kind of literary feedback. This is me trying to do a (Charles) Beaumont story or a deal-with-the-devil story or a Robert Bloch-type story. But I get ideas from all over the place. Drunken conversations with friends, with other writers. Sometimes it starts with an image: I see in my mind a drop of blood on a stainless steel blade. Sometimes it's a conscious effort to imitate someone whose work I like. I just wrote a story titled "Un-listed." (New Blood, Summer '89.) I wanted to do something that had a Richard Christian Matheson-type feel to it, and that title sounded to me like something he'd come up with—though it's not at all a Matheson-type story. Except that it's short. I like the story because I managed to work in a really tough line that I've been wanting to use: "Merry Fucking Christmas!" I love that line.

CD: Peeking into your psyche a bit, how often do dreams and fears enter into the process?

RELLING: Sometimes dreams do. "Abbott & Costello Go To Jonestown" (*The Infinite Man*—Scream/Press) came from a dream, though I'd had the title before I had the dream. But fears? I really can't say. There's not a lot that scares me—I'm not a daredevil, but I don't run away from scary situations, either. I have the stock human fears, I suppose, but I don't worry about dying every time I get behind the wheel of a car. Though living in LA, maybe I should. (Laughs.)

For me, writing horror fiction isn't necessarily a way to exorcise demons, though I've

exorcised a few on occasion. Writing is a job, but it's also a way to deal with feelings. Fear is one (feeling), but so is rage. . . in which case (writing) can be cathartic. Sometimes I do indictments of bad behavior I see in other people. Sometimes . . . it's whatever emotional stuff I feel like dealing with.

CD: What would happen if you were forced to quit writing? Robert R. McCammon said in a recent interview that he thought horror writers were such nice people because they get so much acid out on paper. Do you see yourself fixating on Jodie Foster or trading cell recipes with Charlie Manson?

RELLING: (Laughs.) You know, I was just thinking about this yesterday. What if somebody offered me a million bucks and said, "Okay, now you can't write anymore." Would I take the money? I might . . .

But there's another side to this. For a long time, I used to tell myself that I hated the act of writing—it was an act of self-loathing or some damn thing. But I was lying to myself. I really love doing this. I get a big kick out of sitting at the word processor and writing. Time just goes away for me then. It's a lot of fun. Sometimes it's a chore, if there's a deadline or I'm just not in the mood. But there's nothing else I'd rather do for a living. Not even be a baseball player.

But if somebody made the right offer? All that money? I don't know. Writing's not the only thing in my life. I can understand why someone like Rick (McCammon) might say, "No, you can't take that away from me." But I could do something else if I had to—be a high school teacher again or

something. Thankfully my writing seems somewhat marketable, because I don't know if I could write and work a day job, too.

CD: Let's end the interview on a topical note: How badly do you miss Traci Lord's X-rated movies?

RELLING: (Laughs.) I suspect we're going to see them again. Her mainstream career's going nowhere. She did a guest shot on *WISGUY* last year—playing a hooker. Big stretch, eh? But I thought she was pretty good. She looked very slutty, but her body's in great shape—it looks like she's been working out. I didn't see *Not of This Earth*, but I heard it was awful. Traci, come back to us. We love you. (Laughs.)

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FOUR - IN - HAND

WILLIAM RELLING JR. is one of our featured writers in this issue!

"You know what I think?" Tony Summers said to me the day we found the strangler's fourth victim. He was slapping the flipper button with his right hand, twisting his back-side hard at the same time—Body English—seeing the silver ball ricochet off a lighted bumper, not looking at me as he spoke. "I think we're going at this all wrong."

I was watching the counter on the pinball machine light up his score—he was Player #1—and listening to the machine's buzzing and jangling; not saying anything myself, just waiting for him to talk. Tony was always like that; being his partner for eight months had taught me that whenever he had something important to say, he would always take his time to preface whatever it was. He liked to let you in things his own way at his own pace, and it could get pretty damned annoying sometimes. But that was Tony. Most of the time, when things were good, he was terrific to be around: a crack-up, a real card. But when things weren't so good . . . well, you either lived with the way he was or you didn't.

"We keep thinking whoever's doing these murders doesn't have any motive," he was saying. "But it just occurred to me what he's been up to all along."

Suddenly the machine chunked, his points registering a free game.

"How 'bout that, Tony," I said. "You won."

We went from the pinball machine into a booth that was against a wall opposite the front entrance to the dim saloon. It was late in the afternoon, but the saloon was one of those places that's always dark no matter what time of the day or night. We might as well have been in a cave, like a couple of vampire bats hiding from the sun.

Each of us had a bottle of beer before him—for Tony it was already his fifth one, and we'd been in the place not quite an hour. I was only on number two, and my bottle was still half full.

I could tell just by looking at him that whatever he had on his mind, it was weighing him down. Which should've come as no surprise to me, considering what he and I had been going through the past couple of weeks: Trying to catch up with a phantom killer who the media had just the day before taken to calling the "Streetside Strangler."

The first victim was a young woman, a teller at a savings-and-loan downtown; her body had been found in an alley a few blocks from the place where she worked. The second was an older man, a plumber; he'd been left behind the wheel of his own truck, parked on the street in front of his shop. The third was another man, a gas station attendant whose boss found him in a stall in the station's men's room.

The last one had been just this morning—and it was one that struck a little too close to home. She was a computer operator who worked for the police department, and she'd been found in her apartment by her roommate, a stewardess who had just gotten back from an out-of-town assignment. Four victims: two male, two female; three white, one black; ranging in age from nineteen to forty-five. They each lived in different parts of the city, and none of the victims had ever met any of the others, not even a chance encounter. There wasn't a single common thread, nothing to connect the victims to each other. Nothing at all.

Except for the black knit necktie that had been used to strangle each of them.

It was our case. Mine and Tony's.

At four-thirty that afternoon, after we had come from the morgue where we watched the autopsy on Victim #4, our boss, Captain Ramsey, called Tony and me into his office, where he laid into us. Not that we weren't expecting it; it'd been nearly three weeks since the first strangling, and the captain was getting antsy because not one lead nor any of the dozen nutcase phone calls confessing to the murders had panned out. We were at a dead end; we knew it and the captain knew it. But he chewed us out anyway, for half an hour.

Tony didn't take it well. As we came out of the captain's office, he steered me by my elbow, out of the homicide squad room, past our desks.



Whispering to me, "We gotta get out of here." I knew it wouldn't do any good to argue; in spite of all of the work that we were skipping out on, Tony was in no mood to stick around.

I looked down at my watch. It was after six.

Tony signaled the bartender for another beer, then looked over at me. I drained the rest of my bottle and nodded. He called out to the bartender, "Make it two!" The bartender waved back.

I watched Tony reach into his pocket for a pack of cigarettes, pull one out, tap it on the table, light it and draw in a deep breath of smoke. He exhaled a heavy sigh, then looked over at me again. The corners of his mouth turned up into a thin smile.

"Waiting me out," he said. "You know me pretty good."

The bartender came over with fresh beers and took away our empties. Tony waited until the guy was out of earshot, then lifted his beer and took a long swallow.

I waited.

"We been lookin' for the connection," he said at last. "Tryin' to figure out what our victims got in common, right? It looks like there isn't a thing. Random killings. Different sexes. Different ages. We find their bodies in different places, all over town. Where's the connection?"

"You tell me," I said.

He nodded slowly, still not entirely sure that he'd made up his mind whether to do that or not. Then he said in a low voice, "What've we got? A bank teller, a plumber, a kid who works in a gas station, a computer operator. Again, what's the connection?"

I sipped my beer. "It's your theory, pal." His thin smile reappeared. Then he asked me, out of the blue, "Did you know the last one?" He mentioned the name of the victim we'd found this morning. "Did you ever have to deal with her, ever have her run a record check or anything for you?"

I shook my head no.

"You're lucky," he said. "She was a real cunt, man. I'm talkin' cunt with a capital C. Like it was a major favor to have her do something for you—something that was part of her job anyway, but still she had to give you grief about it." He swallowed the rest of his beer, then gestured to the bartender again. "I can think of a dozen people off the top of my head who'd like to've strangled her. She was that miserable a human being."

"So?"

He frowned, then said, "So think about it. Bank teller, plumber, filling station man. And her." He was looking at me, waiting for an answer.

I shrugged.

"You're not tryin'," he said.

I said impatiently, "Then why don't you tell me —"

Just as the bartender set another bottle in front of Tony. The guy looked at me and I shook my head. He went away.

Tony was watching the bartender move back to the other side of the bar and resume a conversation he'd been having with a pair of young ladies—they looked like secretaries who had just gotten off from work. Still looking at them, Tony said to me, "You ever notice what's really wrong with the way things are today? I mean *really* notice?"

I didn't say anything.

"You go into a supermarket," he said.

"You see a kid stacking cereal boxes, you ask him, 'Excuse me, but where do you keep the stewed tomatoes?' 'I don't know' he says, 'ask the manager.' And you say, 'Okay, where's the manager?' And he says, 'He's not here today.'"

Tony stubbed out his cigarette. "Or say you're in a department store. You ever notice how the sales help, they don't find the customers anymore, it's the customers who have to go find the help? You got to look for somebody who's hiding in a corner or a woman who's walking real slow down an aisle or somebody who's trying to stay out of sight behind a counter. Or maybe three or four people together, and they're all laughin' and havin' a good time, and you walk up to 'em and say, 'Can somebody help me please?' and what you get is, 'Sorry, we don't work in this section.'"

He had reached into his coat for another cigarette, and seemed to be having trouble remembering which pocket he'd put the pack into. He found the pack at last, but had to put the cigarette to his lips slowly to keep it under control. I took his lighter from him and lit the cigarette, and he nodded thanks. I noticed that his eyes had started to glaze over, and I thought to myself: *That's enough for you m'lad* . . .

"It's a fucking epidemic," he was saying. Then he was leaning over the table, resting his arms. He motioned for me to come closer. I could smell the stale beer and burnt tobacco on his breath.

He said, "What if you got somebody who's had it up to here?" The edge of the hand that

was holding the cigarette aloof across his throat. "Somebody who's so sick and tired of being treated like a piece of crap by people who are s'posed to be serving *him*."

"Him?" I said.

"Or her. Man, woman, doesn't matter. Maybe it's somebody whose job it is to be nice to people all day himself. Maybe another salesman or something, or somebody who runs a complaint department and works damn hard and just sees everybody else getting away with being ignorant slob all the time. I don't know, maybe somebody who has to spend all day listening to other people's problems . . . like a priest or a shrink or —"

"Or a cop?" I said.

His eyes locked on mine. "Yeah," he said. "Sure. A cop. Why not?"

I saw him looking over to the bartender once more, and I caught his arm as he raised it to signal. "Forget it," I said. "It's time you and I went home—"

"What do you think pushes him over the edge?" he went on, ignoring me. "He goes to the bank 'cause somebody there's screwed up his statement or something. And after he stands in line for half an hour, the teller treats him like it's his fault that on account of their screwing up his deposit he's bounced a couple hundred dollars worth of checks, and it's tough luck, but he's gonna have to pay the ten or twelve or fifteen dollar service charge on each one anyway. That's one. Then say a couple days later, the guy's bathtub backs up and the plumber gives him a hard time about it, like he's the reason why all his pipes are corroded. That's two. Then the guy pulls into a gas station and

maybe asks the kid to check under the hood, and the kid says, 'Who me?' 'Yes, you, dammit, it's supposed to be a goddamn *service* station . . .'"

He caught himself when he noticed that everybody in the place was looking in the direction of our table. He had gotten very loud.

"C'mon," I said, pushing myself up. I dropped some money on the table, then bent to help my partner to his feet. "We're getting out of here."

The alley was dark. It was also deserted except for the two of us, and I could make out his lumbering figure ahead of me, staggering as he walked to our car. All the while I was running through my mind what he'd said to me in the saloon.

As well as what he didn't say.

I was thinking to myself: *What is it that you're really telling me?* That he could sympathize? Or that maybe he was confessing to me he knew who the killer really was . . . ?

Or what?

I wanted to ask him, very badly.

I considered asking him as I came up from behind while he was fumbling with his keys, trying to open the passenger's side door. But I decided not to as I looped my necktie around his throat. I couldn't risk it, because there were still too many people who needed taking care of.

But I was also remembering what Tony had said that afternoon in the squad room as we were leaving. He'd said, "Let's you and me go tie one on."

I pulled the loop tight, smiling to myself.

Thinking: *That Tony, he sure is a card.*

Tie one on. I like that. I like that a lot.

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BETTER THAN BREADCRUMBS

RONALD KELLY is a natural storyteller—a magician with words. Ronald's first novel, **HINDSIGHT** (Zebra), will hit the bookstores in mid-December. He has sold his short fiction to the likes of **GRUE**, **NEW BLOOD**, **DEATHREALM**, **NOCTULPA**, **2AM**, **AFTER HOURS** and over a dozen other publications. I wouldn't miss anything he writes!

They did not fool him with their innocence. His intense paranoia made him privy to their secret desires. Unsavory desires. Sure, they appeared harmless enough, regarding him benevolently with tiny, map-pin eyes, singing their sweet songs and hopping gingerly across the freshly mown summer grass. He knew that it was all a clever deception however, a lie tucked neatly inside feathered skulls, hidden within miniscule brains no larger than a wad of chewing gum.

Troy Saunders hated birds because he feared them.

But, perhaps fear was too lucid a term to describe the depth of his feelings. Mortification was more like it. The Hitchcock film had planted that awful seed of enlightenment, had opened his youthful eyes at the tender age of seven and revealed the true nature of those foul-spirited fowls.

Since that late-show viewing, the phobia had only worsened, transcending childhood and adolescence. His sleep was invaded by horrid nightmares conjured from the images of that cursed movie; divebombing sea gulls interrupting a birthday party game of Blindman's Bluff, stone hearths vomiting forth gorge upon gorge of panicked sparrows, old farmers lying askew from their beds, eyeless sockets glaring blankly, laced with rivulets of blood.

As he grew older, the roots of his ornithophobia strengthened and burrowed ever deeper into the furtive earth of his psyche, anchoring firmly as he approached adulthood. His shuddering horror found an outlet in cruelty. Acts of hostile retaliation and barbarity were performed upon the tiny creatures. Birds were clipped of their wing feathers and fed to the cat, while Grandmother Saunders' yellow canary was drowned beneath sudsy dishwater.

Others had been blinded and maimed with the aid of his trusty BB gun at the age of twelve. His maturity only brought about more inventive ways of torment. His latest action had taken place during the final semester at Georgia State. His roommate's pet mynah, who could voice nothing but a steady stream of expletives and abusive language, had inexplicably been seized by a fit of convulsions so intense that the bird had regurgitated its own entrails. The owner had been too grief-stricken to search out the cause. If he had, he might have discovered that the mynah's seed had been doctored with a potent mixture of rat poison and Drano.

Now it was the height of summer break and the atrocities of young Troy continued. Instead of heading south to the white sands and glistening, tanned girl-flesh of the Florida beaches, he had decided to hang out at his parents' estate. In fact, his mother and father were gone to Atlanta for the day, leaving him to do as he pleased, free to vent his sadistic tendencies without the overbearing shadow of parental authority there to dampen the festivities.

It was well past noon when Troy stretched out on a lounge beside the kidney-shaped pool out back, soaking up some rays and inflicting explosive death. He applied a little sunscreen, sipped on a Coke and rum, and then, thumbing another cartridge into the breech and locking the bolt, lazily lifted his father's Weatherby to eye level.

The big-game rifle felt good and heavy, solid with fatal authority, as he laid his oily face against the flat of the hardwood stock and sighted down on his target. In the magnified screen of the Bushnell scope Troy watched the activity beneath the ivy-covered fence at the far end of the pool.

A group of curious and hungry songbirds congregated around a tin pie plate heaped with breadcrumbs and table scraps; robins, a couple of purple martins, a sassy bluejay. *Just look at the filthy buggers*, thought Troy, a shudder of revulsion running down his spine. They appeared so convincingly dumb, so contented with a simple sip of water here, a sunflower seed there, maybe a nice, juicy bug every now and then. But they didn't fool him. He could see through their facade, could sense their under-

lying hunger. It was a nasty little hunger, one that no one really expected of them. It was a hunger for stringy strips of throbbing flesh gouged by needle talons . . . a hunger for the exposed spheres of human eyes, waiting to be pierced by darting beaks.

Troy waited patiently for the right one to come along and, after awhile the right one did. He hugged the bolt-action close like a blue steel lover, his finger resting lightly upon the hair trigger. With a small grin of cruel pleasure, he centered the crosshairs on a gray bird with white-tipped plumage and fired.

A .458 Magnum slug, originally intended for elephant and water buffalo, entered the bird's satiny breast, expanding, exploding the unsuspecting fowl into a bloody tangle of torn flesh and flying feathers. The other birds immediately took flight, retreating to the refuge of surrounding trees before the bullwhip crack of the big rifle had even begun to fade.

"You are a very sick young man," said a voice dripping with pure disgust.

Troy looked over to see the caramel-hued face of Old Miguel, the new gardener, glaring at him from over the partially trimmed hedge. The boy laid the smoking gun aside and freshened his drink with a bottle of Bacardi he had filched from his father's liquor cabinet. "Oh, you really think so?" Troy asked, secretly hoping to prod the elderly Cuban into heated provocation.

"Yes, I certainly do. Do you not know that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird?" scolded Miguel, sounding like Gregory Peck in that old movie about the two kids and Boo Radley. "Do you not know that they are harmless? That they do nothing but provide sweet music for us all to enjoy?"

Troy wanted to tell the old coot to mind his own business, but said nothing for a few long moments. Then he eyed the groundskeeper from behind dark shades, a crafty grin of his tanned face. "Tell me, Miguel, what is your favorite bird?"

The gardener was puzzled by the young man's untypical question. His swarthy features hardened as he continued his pruning, then softened slightly. He smiled. "I would have to say the flamingo. I lived in Florida my first years in America and I always admired the beauty of the bird. So graceful, like a ballerina, and yet so fragile, like the bloom of a delicate flower."

Troy chuckled and again sighted through the eyepiece of the high-powered scope. "I wish I had myself one of those fancy flamingoes

here right now. I'd take much pleasure in blowing its head clean off its skinny pink neck." As an added intimidation, he turned the muzzle of the empty rifle toward the elderly man, stitched the filaments of the reticle across the gardener's angry face, and said "Bang!"

Old Miguel looked as if he might leap the hedge and take his shears to the insolent young man. "Who do you think you are to pass judgement upon these poor creatures, the most passive and beautiful of God's creations? You, Mr. Troy Saunders, with your moussed hair and designer clothes, your Porsche and your stock portfolio! I don't believe you would be so very quick to perform such horrible acts if your father was made aware of your deviant behavior—"

The college student sat up, pushing his sunglasses to the top of his head, and gave the Cuban a warning look. "You listen up, you old fart. If you utter so much as a single word of my poolside activities to either one of my parents, I swear I'll have you fired and your green card revoked so fast that it will make your head spin. You'll be back in Castro Country before you can say Bay of Pigs."

The old man showed only contempt in face of young Troy's threat. He snipped away a few last obtrusive twigs, then stomped off toward the little bungalow that stood adjacent to the main house on the Saunders' multi-acre estate.

Troy had himself a few yuks over that little confrontation, then stretched out in the July sun, sipping his rum and waiting. It would take a while for the birds to get over their gun-shyness and return to the plate of scraps. But, strangely enough, he didn't wait for long. Five minutes later his attention was drawn by the noisy fluttering of wings.

"CAW!"

He looked up and instantly his heart quickened. Standing alone before the scrap pan, was the biggest, blackest crow Troy had ever laid eyes on. It was about eighteen inches from the tip of its ebony tail to the point of its equally dark beak. It stared at the plate of bird-bait, then stared at Troy. Its eyes were like pools of liquid tar, possessing an almost taunting disdain. "CAW!" it said once more, before grasping the rim of the plate with its beak and, with a flip of its massive head, dumped the contents into the short-cropped grass.

"Oh, you're really asking for it now," said Troy beneath his breath. He retrieved the rifle slowly, so as not to spook the bird, re-loaded, and lifted it to his shoulder. He settled

the crosshairs unerringly on the crow's temple. "Thus quote the raven . . . Nevermore." He squeezed the trigger, relishing the explosive report and the bruising mule-kick of the recoil against his right shoulder.

He lowered the rifle, expecting to witness the crow's headless body lying amid a snowfall of bloodspeckled breadcrumbs.

"CAW!" harped the blackbird, eyeing him with an expression akin to amusement.

"No way I could have missed," muttered Troy. "I had the sonofabitch dead to rights!" He swiftly reloaded, reshouldered the weapon, fired.

The jacketed bullet, aimed directly at the target of the crow's shiny black breast, kicked up a geyser of dust a couple of feet to the rear.

"CAW!"

Troy was enraged. "I should have hit him, dammit! Should have blown him to smithereens!" He stood up for a better aim this time.

After going through the process of reloading, he again brought the gun into line. Troy settled in the sights and saw . . . nothing.

"Where the hell did he go?"

His answer came instantly and directly behind his left ear.

"CAW!"

He whirled in sudden heart-thumping panic, the rifle shooting its load harmlessly skyward. The ugly thing was upon him in a flash, beating at his head with night-black wings, squawking and pecking and raking at him with sharp talons. Troy let out a feminine shriek of alarm. As he tried to escape the raven's wrath, his feet became entangled in the lounge chair. With a lurch, he was dumped rather unceremoniously into the fluoridated waters of the swimming pool, expensive fire-arm and all.

Troy resurfaced, sputtering and swearing, in time to see the raven winging its way over the roof of the main house. "CAW! CAW! CAW!" it screamed almost laughingly, then was gone.

The humiliating attack of the monster crow returned to haunt Troy Saunders later that day, ruining his evening in more ways than one.

First of all, the drenching dump into the pool had aggravated his delicate sinus condition. He had been invited to a beer party by some of his college buddies in Atlanta that night, but he knew he would turn out to be a real drag with the blinding headache that had gripped him mercilessly by six o'clock. He laid down in his darkened bedroom after supper, listening to the

echoes of laughter and conversation drifting up from the poolside terrace below. His parents were throwing a little get-together for some of their high society friends; mostly corporate executives, a state senator or two and their prim and proper wives.

Then, as if the pounding ache behind his cheeks and eyes wasn't enough, he fell asleep around eight-thirty and had a dream. One of those dreams . . . about birds.

He found himself sitting on a bench opposite the playground of a quaint two-story schoolhouse. He felt disoriented, for the rural setting and the distinctive tang of saltwater in the air was strangely familiar. The faint sound of children singing "Risselty-Rosselty, now-now-now . . ." inside the white clapboard building stirred unpleasant emotions.

Suddenly, he knew. He stared at the weathered sign over the curved archway of the entrance. It read: BODEGA BAY SCHOOL.

He watched uneasily as Tippi Hedren, blonde and poised, took the bench opposite him, her back to the playground. She didn't notice as the first crow lit on an upper tier of the skeletal jungle gym.

Troy wanted to warn her, but found he was unable to do so. He could only sit there passively and observe.

Tippi took a cigarette from a case, lit it, and began to have a leisurely smoke . . . still unaware of the gathering activity taking place behind her. There were four birds perched there now, staring skyward, waiting for their confederates to show.

Look behind you! he wanted to scream. *Look at all those birds!* But she seemed as oblivious to his presence as she was to the crows.

The maddening repetition of that childish song continued inside the schoolhouse. The young lady in the smart pea-green outfit continued her smoking, then, upon chance, glanced toward the heavens to see a single pitch-black raven circling overhead. Slowly, she followed its progress as it made a deliberate surge earthward to join the multitude gathered patiently upon swings and see-saws.

Now is your chance, Troy thought, *powerless to move or speak. Get up slowly, ever so slowly, and make your way to the schoolhouse. Hurry now, the song has ended . . . they will be going out for recess soon. Go inside and warn Suzanne Pleshette and the children. Make like a fire drill and exit the building carefully, but quietly. Head down the hill, toward town . . .*

As if reading his mind, the woman got up

and walked to the building. Troy sat there and waited nervously, his ears straining for the first sound of children's feet pounding the pavement. Yes, he could hear them now, and so could the birds. As one, they took flight, darkening the sky like a boiling stormcloud.

But they did not soar around the peak of the schoolhouse to descend, pecking and clawing, at frightened children. No, they headed in an entirely different direction this time. Across the road . . . straight for him.

He couldn't move, couldn't scream, couldn't do one damned thing but sit there as the churning flock engulfed him, hungrily, savagely picking his immobile body clean, peeling away flesh and sinew, right down to the bare bones.

Troy awoke with a scream lodged midway in his throat. He choked it off before it could emerge. "Damn!" he cursed, his body shivering and bathed with cold sweat. "What a nightmare that was!"

He sat on the edge of his bed for awhile before he noticed that the room was pitch black. Totally dark and totally silent. No sounds of partying echoed from the terrace below. "Must be pretty late." He glanced over at the digital clock on the nightstand, but the glowing red numerals were not visible.

Shakily, Troy got up, the pain behind his eyes now only a dull throbbing ache. He stumbled to the door, felt for the lightswitch, snapped it on. Nothing. Still inky darkness. "The power must be off," he concluded.

But he knew that was not the case as he turned toward the open window at the far side of his bedroom. He could feel a warm, humid breeze blowing in, but the square of pale, nocturnal light that should have been there was nonexistent. There was only a dense wall of impenetrable darkness every way he turned.

"What is this crap?" he muttered. He placed his hands absently to his face and found it wet, not with sweat but with something much warmer and thicker. His hands came away sticky . . . and there was that peculiar smell. The hot-copper stench of fresh blood.

His heart pounded in his chest and he began to hyperventilate as he reluctantly returned his hands to his face. Slowly his fingers slid up the gore-slickened cheeks. Abruptly, they discovered the awful source of his nightblindness. They sank to the knuckles in gaping, warm-wet holes on either side of his nose. The frayed ends of severed optic nerves teased his fingertips before he could withdraw them in sickened horror.

"Oh, God . . . my eyes!" he moaned, sinking heavily to his knees in despair. "*They pecked out my freaking eyes!*"

Panic overcame him. He stumbled sightlessly into the outer hallway, making his way to his parents' room. He threw open the door, hands outstretched, feeling for their bed. "Mom . . . Dad . . . gotta help me . . . my eyes . . . gone . . . call an ambulance!"

He received no reply to his frantic sobs. Troy reached the bed and found no one there. In fact, it was still made. The bedclothes hadn't even been turned down for the night.

"Mom . . . Dad!" He staggered back into the hallway, groping for direction. Then, from the stairway, came a sound. A rusty, shrill sound that made Troy's blood run cold with fear and dread.

"CAW!"

"So it was *you*, you black bastard!" he hellowed. "It was you who did this horrible thing!" He reached for the hall table, found the heavy brass candlestick he knew was there. With a mighty heave, he threw it in the general direction of the bird. It struck the stained-glass window at the head of the staircase, shattering it loudly.

There was a pregnant silence, then the fluttering of oily wings as the cursed fowl made its way downstairs. "CAW!" it called invitingly.

Troy found the stairway and worked his way downward as he clutched at the sturdy, oaken banister. "Where are you now, you sonofabitch?" he half-screamed, half-weep. "When I get my hands on you, I'll wring your lousy neck!"

From his dad's study: "CAW!"

He stumbled, feet dragging, across the expensive Oriental rug, then slid open the double doors. He carefully skirted the leather upholstered furnishings, felt along the walls with their carved mahogany bookcases laden with old and priceless volumes. "Don't be such a coward!" he said vehemently. "I know you're in here!"

Then the sound of pumping wings cut swiftly across the study, disappearing through the open glass doors that led onto the terrace. Troy reached the doorway, afraid that the open air had secured his enemy's release. He was on the verge of hellowing a curse of anguish, when the small sounds of mass movement froze him. He stood perfectly still and listened.

The backyard was full of them, teaming with patiently perched black birds like those on

the school playground back at Bodega Bay. He clutched the doorframe in terror, afraid to move a muscle or utter a sound that might draw their attention. Then, finally, he gathered his nerve and ducked back into the study.

He fumbled along the wall until he found the huge antique guncase. He opened the doors, his bloody hands traveling from one longarm to the next. The Weatherby wouldn't do this time. He needed something with a little more punch and spread to it. Yes, this would do it . . . the Remington pump. He took the shotgun from its rack, then rummaged through the lower drawers of the cabinet for the correct ammunition.

After having loaded the gun with twelve gauge shells, he stepped boldly out onto the terrace, the cobblestones cool against his bare feet. "Here I am, you filthy mothers!" he growled. "Come and get me!"

"CAW!" inquired a bird to his right. He shouldered the gun and unleashed a booming hail of double-ought buckshot. He heard the dying squawk and the sound of the canopied patio table crashing to its side.

Suddenly the yard was hectic with the sounds of cawing and the flapping of airborne wings. Troy pumped the shotgun and fired, saturating the air with lead pellets.

"CAW! CAW! CAW!" shrieked the panicked fowls. He could sense their torn bodies plummeting as they crashed onto the smooth hardness of the terrace stones. "CAW!" yelped one to his left. He fired another round. The bird hit the pool with a resounding splash. *Cripes, that must've been a big one*, thought Troy with satisfaction.

He heard a number of them winging their way toward the rear gate. Three more shots dispatched them neatly before they could make good their escape.

He worked the slide again and found that his test shell had been spent. But it no longer mattered. The job was finished. "I got them . . . got them all." Troy found an overturned patio chair and sat there in his new state of permanent darkness. He breathed in the fresh night air, sweet with the scent of death, and cherished the complete and utter silence . . . at least until the sirens approached by way of Atlanta.

"It's a real mess back there," the police officer told his partner. "Bodies all over the place. Looks like the kid went berserk . . . killed his folks and all their high-class friends."

The other patrolman regarded the blood-

splattered young man who sat handcuffed in the rear of the squad car. "My eyes," said Troy Saunders. "How could they have done such a thing? My poor, poor eyes . . ."

The two cops exchanged questioning looks, then shrugged. They couldn't figure out what the kid was mumbling about. His eyes looked perfectly okay to them. He had to be a real nut case.

"So you heard the shooting . . . and then what?" one of the officers asked, continuing his questioning of the crime's only witness.

Old Miguel shook his head sadly. "I ran from my bungalow, looked over the hedge, and there he was, young Mr. Troy, standing over all those poor people with a smoking shotgun. It was horrible . . . so very tragic!"

"Yes," agreed the cop. He turned to his partner. "Phil, you better get on the radio and call for some back-up and the coroner's office. Looks like this little massacre is gonna take all night to clean up."

As the policemen began contacting the proper authorities, Old Miguel slipped away, heading around the side of the main house, toward the terrace. When he got to the fence, he peered at the shot-riddled bodies that lay sprawled and stiffening upon the bloodstained tiles, a couple of them floating facedown in the cloudy waters of the pool. The overhead patio lights cast an eerie glow upon the awful carnage.

Miguel stared at the sickening scene for a long moment, but not with grief or shock. No, a peculiar expression of great satisfaction creased his dark-skinned features. That and . . . could it possibly have been . . . a look of intense, carrion-like *hunger*.

The old man lifted his eyes, eyes as black and shiny as those of a raven, to the dark foliage of the surrounding trees. He smiled almost fatherly and very softly whispered one word.

"Caw."

They descended from the trees then, thousands of them. A massive, churning flock of cardinals, bluebirds, finches, birds of all species. They glided as one from the thick summer greenery and covered the twelve carcasses like gently fallen leaves. They made no sound that might alert the two policemen out front. They knew it would be a good twenty minutes or so before the others arrived and began to sort through the mess the bird-hater had unknowingly committed that night.

Until then, it would be a far better feast than that which mere breadcrumbs could provide.

SEPARATE WAYS

ROMAN A. RANIERI's "Officer's Club" appeared in the premiere issue of CEMETERY DANCE and received rave reviews. His work is scheduled to appear in future editions of ELDRITCH TALES, FRIGHT DEPOT, FESTERING BRAINSORE and Tyson Blue's SIDESHOW anthology. He is currently preparing a non-fiction article as a contributing editor of NEW BLOOD Magazine. Roman lives in Philadelphia with his wife, Maureen. He recently completed his first novel, a supernatural horror novel. Look for big things in the future from this hot writer!

Mel Goldstein felt uneasy as he rang the doorbell. He had nothing to gain from seeing Ellen again now that their divorce was final, but he sincerely wished that they could part on peaceful terms, if not as friends, then at least not as enemies.

"Come in, Mel. You could have used your key. I haven't changed the locks," Ellen said, smiling as she opened the door. She was wearing the Helston dress he had given her on her last birthday. He had to admit she *did* look lovely in it.

"I didn't know what to expect. The last few times we've tried to talk, things got ugly."

She led him into the living room. He automatically headed for the leather recliner which had always been his favorite chair.

"I've decided to accept our divorce as best as I can and get on with my own life. I'm satisfied with the settlement we agreed on. I suppose there are hundreds of divorced women who would envy me."

"I'm very happy to hear you say that, Ellen. I really didn't want to end it with such bad feelings between us. You certainly had a right to be upset, but there was no reason for you to hate me."

She came toward him from the bar and handed him a Scotch on the rocks. "Why would I possibly want to hate you, Mel?" she asked, gracefully lowering herself onto the sofa.

"Because I had to work two jobs to put you through medical school, or because I stood by

you and encouraged you to keep at it until you became a successful surgeon?"

"Please, Ellen. Let's not start this again," he said, disgustedly. "You know it won't change anything."

She watched as he took a huge gulp and swallowed half his drink, then she continued, "Don't I have a good enough reason to hate you, Mel? After I devoted ten years of my life to you, and worked to support you during the lean times, you suddenly come home one night and tell me you want a divorce so that you can shack up with some twenty-year-old bimbo. Can you think of a better reason to hate someone?"

"I came here tonight because I wanted us to be friends, but I see that just isn't possible. You got the house, the BMW, and half the investments. How could I have been any fairer?"

"Fair? I made sacrifices for you because I loved you, then you left me for the first young bitch who spread her legs when she saw your wallet. Was *that* fair?"

"Shut up, Ellen! I won't let you talk about Cindy like that," Mel shouted, rising to his feet. "I'm leaving, and I'll never set foot in this house again."

He took a step—and staggered.

Ellen laughed.

He brought his left hand up to his face. He was sweating. "What? What's happening to me?" His words were slurred, and his tongue lolled thickly in his mouth. He heard Ellen laughing as he fell back into the recliner—into darkness.

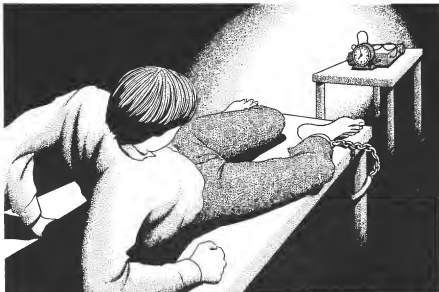
Mel awoke to a blinding light shining through his eyelids. He coughed as he opened his eyes. He blinked, trying to see past the light. Where was he? How had he gotten here?

"Feeling better, darling?" Ellen asked, coming into his field of vision.

"Where am I?" he asked hoarsely.

"In the basement. I've had it made into an operating room for you. Do you like it?"

His eyes darted around the white room, his mind trying desperately to comprehend what



was happening. He rolled onto his side and looked down. He was lying on an operating table. A few inches away was a stainless steel tray filled with surgical instruments. As he moved again, he heard a chain rattle and felt a pull on his right leg. He sat up and looked at his feet. There was a chain looped around his right ankle and padlocked to the table. "What in hell do you think you're doing?"

"Relax, darling. I just want to see how good a surgeon you really are. As you can see, I've spared no expense."

"Have you gone crazy?" he yelled. "Unlock this chain immediately!"

Ellen moved aside to reveal a small table which she had been blocking from Mel's view. An oddly shaped object covered most of the tabletop. "You see this, darling? It happens to be a time bomb. You won't be able to reach it from where you are, but if you're quick enough with those surgical instruments, you might be able to amputate your foot and hop over here to turn off this switch before you get blown to pieces."

A nervous smile came to Mel's face. "This is a joke, right? Where would you get a time bomb?"

"A person can get anything they want if they have enough money, even a bomb, or a sexy

little whore. Right, darling?"

"How could you even think of doing something like this?"

"Just as easily as you thought about dumping me for that little bitch."

"But I didn't mean to hurt you. I just thought it was time for us to go our separate ways."

"And that's just what we're going to do," she chuckled. "I'm going to Jamaica, and you're going to the moon."

Mel began to tremble with fear as he realized that Ellen fully intended to go through with it. He was totally at the mercy of a lunatic—a lunatic who hated him. "You don't really want to do this. You loved me once. You can't hate me enough to do this. Let me go, and maybe we can get back together again."

"No thanks! It's a little too late for that. Now, how much time should a great surgeon like you need?" she asked, setting the timer.

"Ellen! Don't do it!" he screamed.

"You're not well. You need help."

"Oh, come on, Mel. Be a sport. I could've just hired a hit man to kill you, but I thought this would be so much more—fun. I'll set it for six minutes." Her finger flicked the switch and a green light came on.

"NOOOO!"

(Continued on page 54)

END OF THE LINE

FRANKLIN E. WALES is a 29 year-old writer from Lombard, Florida. He lives with his wife and their three-year-old son. He works two jobs, 15 hours a day, and writes his horror fiction early in the morning before dawn. His fiction has appeared in SCAPES #2, and he is currently at the halfway mark of his first novel. "End Of The Line" is deadly sharp-pure horror!

Life had finally dealt Reb an ace. After sixty-odd years of hard times, some unknown angel of mercy just handed him a virgin bottle of Jack Daniels. Best damn sippin' whiskey around, straight out of his own birth-state; God's own Tennessee.

"Thanks mister." Those were the last words Reb said, as the business end of a ballpeen hammer punched a new eye socket between those God had given him.

The bottle of Jack Daniels shattered, soaking Reb's fallen cap.

CLICK-wtfrr-CLICK-wtfrr-CLICK-wtfrr . . . new angle . . . CLICK-wtfrr-CLICK-wtfrr . . . add a few crumpled one dollar bills . . . CLICK-wtfrr-CLICK-wtfrr . . . new angle . . . CLICK-wtfrr-CLICK-wtfrr . . . finished.

"Emergency."

"There's been a murder; the alley between 7th and 8th."

"Your name sir?"

click

"All right, get those damn photographers out of here." Detective Sergeant Will Richards barked. "A wino's been iced for cryin' out loud. It ain't like the president got shot."

Uniformed police officers pushed the crowd of news-hounds back.

"Fuckin' ghouls," he muttered.

"Say honey, you lookin' a little peaked tonight. How about a date? You and me could have some fun baby."

"Sounds good to me."

"Oh yee; Maxie's gonna take good care of you honey. Make you forget all your prob-

lems."

"Um . . . how much for the night?"

"The whole night? Honey, Maxie's a working girl; it's gonna cost you—"

He unrolled five one hundred dollar bills.

"Whose honey, as long as you ain't into no weird stuff, you just bought yourself a night to remember."

"Well . . . I like . . . you know, to dominate." A nervous cough. "No pain or anything. Just to give the orders . . . and maybe tie you to the bed—"

"No whips or any other toys?"

"Of course not," shocked. "Just have you . . . you know . . ."

"Honey, Maxie knows just what you mean." Licks her lips. "Am I right?"

"Ye-yes."

"Okay honey, but I gotta tell you up front; the first sign of anything weird I'm gonna start yelling. Like I said, Maxie's a working girl, and she can't afford to get hurt. Understand?"

Richards stood outside unit nine of the Paradise Inn. "My God . . . Don't you ghouls ever give up?" He stared with disgust at the half dozen reporters, and their cameramen gathered outside the door.

How could they make their livings this way, he wondered. Hell, four of them had been on the scene when the first squad car arrived.

Oh the wonders of police scanners. Their film had been confiscated sure, but there was no telling how much had been hidden before that.

"Come on Sarge, we're just trying to make a living, same as you."

"NO! Not the same as me. Not ever. My job is to put an end to this sort of shit. All you maggots want is to glorify the wreckage."

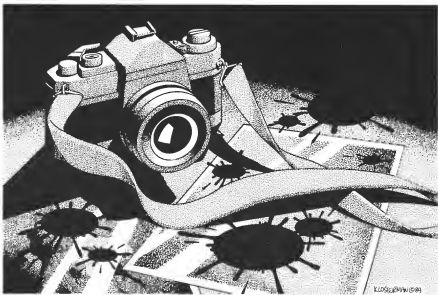
Richards lit a Winston. *Graveyard shift; how appropriate.* He scanned the crowd. "Hey, you there with the four cameras. Come over here."

"Yes sir?"

"You look familiar." He crushed the cigarette for effect. "Why is that?"

"I'm a—"

"Sir," a uniformed officer stepped up.



"The coroner has made a preliminary decision."

After gesturing the man with the cameras, Richards focused his attention on the *blue*.
"What have you got?"

"The victim was a black woman probably in her early twenties. Most likely a hooker, the manager says he's seen her around before."

"Cause of death—strangulation. The weapon—a black nylon stocking."

"*Oh, boy.* Now do you suppose you could tell me something that wasn't obvious from looking inside?" Richards said. "Did you think to ask the manager for a description of the man who returned the room?"

The young officer looked at the ground.
"Yes sir," he said quietly. "The manager said—"

"Not now." Richards said flatly, motioning toward the crowd of reporters.

"Yes sir." The officer turned, still looking at the ground.

Richards looked at the rookie. He remembered another young man eager to make an impression on his superiors a long time ago.
"Hey, Officer, good job."

The young man straightened up immediately. "Thank you, sir."

Richards turned his attention to the

camera man. "You were one of the ones here early." It was not a question.

"Yes, sir."

"Then you saw her; what do you think?"

"Takes a sick sonofabitch to do that."

"Get any good pictures?"

"How the hell should I know?" The man was irritated. "I've got four cameras, your boys took four rolls of film from me; one from each. Did I get any good shots? When you develop them give me a call and *you tell me.*"

Richards shifted gears. "Why *do* you look familiar to me; what's your name?"

"Johnathan Bryant." He was calmer now.

"Oh yeah," the memory surfaced. "Living in The City ; right? You did those books with pictures of street-people across the country. Right?"

"Yeah, that's me."

"My wife's got both of 'em. She's a real bleeding heart type. Always collecting money for soup kitchens and stuff."

"Glad she likes them."

"So what are you doing here?"

"New slant," Bryant said. "After two volumes of showing how these people live, I decided it was time to show where they're headed if we don't help."

"Sheese, you sound just like my wife."

"Tell you what Sergeant; give me your card, I'll send you a signed copy before they hit

the bookstores. Maybe you could make some points with the wife."

"Say," thoughtfully, "Would you do that?" Richards fished a business card from his pocket. "Man, oh man, that would be great." He scribbled his wife's name on the card.

"Sure." Bryant took the card. "Am I free to go?"

"Of course, and thanks Mr. Bryant."

"Call me John." He disappeared into the growing crowd of onlookers drawn to the tragedy.

Richards couldn't believe his luck. Elaine would be thrilled. If he worked this right, he figured he could score some major points.

Johnathan walked into the penthouse apartment, straight to the bar. He poured a double Scotch, then as an afterthought brought the bottle to his lips. The alcohol burned past his heart, which had taken up residence in his throat, and down to his stomach.

"Damn," he muttered after his breath returned.

He took another shot from the bottle then replaced it. He turned on the stereo, then sunk down into the nearby plush chair. Johnathan sipped from his glass with deliberate slowness, as the soothing sounds flowed from the radio station. He recognized it at once: *Traffic: The Low Spark Of High Heeled Boys*.

"... the percentage you're playing is too high priced ..."

"Damn," he said again.

"... while you're living beyond all your means ..."

Stupid, he thought, just plain stupid. No more inside gigs. Too damn risky. Another one of those and it would be all over.

"... kizz me goodnight editie."

He drained the glass, it went down unobstructed. His heart had returned to its rightful place—good. The film should be developed. Nah, the film would be there in the morning. He checked his watch, 3:21 a.m., another drink should be poured.

He glanced down at the chrome and glass coffee table. Yep, still there. On each side of the table sat an oversized book; *Living In The City*, and *Living In The City, Volume Two*. Great name for a sequel, he thought. Wonder how long it took the boys in the editing department to think up that little gem. He poured another double and returned to the comforts of his chair.

Johnathan was by his own description, a coffee table photographer. His two published collections were both oversized albums of black and white prints. The kind of book usually found on the bargain table of any chain bookstore. Big bulky items with one photograph per page, and a small line of print stating the name of the subject, and the city he had found them in.

His two books however, somehow refrained from the cutout table graveyard. The first, two years old, and it's sister, a year younger, still retained their original cover prices of \$29.99.

Jonathan knew his success wouldn't hold out much longer. No one remembers a coffee table photographer for long. Soon people would tire of his vacant eyed portraits and his work would sink into obscurity. He hoped to do yet another sequel, and then if possible, break out while he was still hot. Hopefully sign on as a staff photographer with *Playboy* or *Hustler*. Their subjects were a much more appealing lot than his own.

The question was could a third volume carry enough punch to carry it over the top.

The answer was simple. A third "Living" book would surely be pushing it. How many heart strings could you pull with the same bit? The solution was to show the end of the line for the street people. The transformation from city streets, to those "streets of gold." That would have all those middle-aged do-gooders crying in their gin and tonics.

His first step was Hollywood; the city of broken dreams. At the end of three weeks Johnathan found himself contemplating his failure through a wall of Scotch and soda. He had taken hundreds of photographs—murders, suicides, accident victims—all DOA's; all wrong. The work he had done was missing something. It was, in a word, stale.

Johnathan met, and passed his limit for alcohol. Give it up, he told himself, give it up and go home. So what was wrong with becoming a staff photographer on a daily newspaper? *It sucked like a Hoover; that's what's wrong.*

Melancholic, Johnathan staggered to his car, finding as he left the lot, the Scotch had hidden his sense of direction.

Searching for something familiar he hadn't even seen the decrepit little old man stumble in front of the car. *Thud*, he hit the brakes, *th-thud*. The car stopped.

Johnathan, now sober, jumped from the car and ran to it's rear. "Oh God," his voice

echoed off the barren streets. Something twisted within his stomach, and he vomited.

The body lay crumpled like a broken toy; both legs twisted grotesquely in opposite directions. The left arm nearly torn in two, while the hand still clutched the neck of a shattered bottle. Sightless eyes stared up at him from a blood splattered face. A dark pool seeped out from beneath the head.

The old man was dead. Nothing to do now except call the police. *The POLICE—News-papers, Scandal—Goodbye Future, Goodbye Playboy, Goodbye Girls.*

Had anyone seen?

Johnathan looked around for the first time. The street was deserted.

The front of the car showed no damage. The old geezer probably hadn't weighed more than ninety pounds. Good. The rear fender had three small spots of wet blood. Suddenly calm, Johnathan retrieved his lens cleaning cloth and fluid from the car. No more blood.

Now all that remained was to get away. To ... he looked again at the broken marionette on the street ... to ... *take a picture.* NO! his mind screamed. *Something has been missing.* No. *Hundreds of pictures, all stale. no. fresh.*

Johnathan moved his car out of range and shot a half roll of film.

All the way back to his motel he wept.

The next morning Johnathan developed the film, in his makeshift darkroom. While the prints dried, he called room service and ordered breakfast.

He had not expected to be able to eat, but found the food went down easily. Over coffee he studied the prints. They were good, *real* good. He found, with a mixture of joy and revulsion, the pain was gone. The horror of his actions, so real the night before, was nowhere to be found. *Hello Future, Hello Hustler, Hello GIRLS.*

Hollywood, Los Angeles, Denver, Baton Rouge, Miami, Washington D.C., and finally back home to Boston. Each had been variations of the same. Move in, dispatch (the term he preferred) a dozen of society's waste products, get the shots, call the police, show up with the reporters, a few more shots to cover himself—next town.

The hardest part, he found, was making each one different from the others. Soon he adapted to the challenge; after all, photography is an art, and he fancied himself an artist.

All without a single hitch—until tonight.

He'd hired a crackhead to get the room for

him; these places never asked for ID anyway. But: What if someone had seen him going in there with *Aer*. Stupid. Just plain stupid.

Johnathan awoke at ten minutes to noon. His muscles were stiff from eight hours in the chair. Standing, he groped for something to hold his balance. Pain ruled his temples. *Excedrin headache number 2025: killed a hooker last night, nearly got caught.*

The developing was finished. Johnathan sat and admired his work. Gazing at the woman who had been called Maxie, a charge of electricity shot through him. He sat the pictures down with a shaking hand.

"Oh God," he whispered.

What had revolted him at first had turned into a sport. He began to tremble at the revelation. The sickening feeling he'd had when he accidentally hit the old man six months ago had been replaced by a sense of adventure. A "can't catch me" attitude. He realized he had begun to *enjoy* the killings.

Johnathan found his stash and drew out three lines of cocaine and quickly snorted them. Wiping his nose, he leaned back in the chairs and waited.

Moments later he began to feel better. *Much, much* better. After all, he reasoned, they were society's throwaways anyhow. All he did was dispatch a few of them early.

With his conscience subdued, Johnathan felt he could now think clearer. It was, after all, only a game, and they were, well, undesirable. The same people who would pine on about what a shame it was for these people to live as they did would hastily turn their heads if one were to confront them on the street.

Johnathan, still wearing the previous night's clothing, reached into his pocket for his Neo-Synephrine. Along with his nasal spray he removed Richard's business card. Written in blue ink was the name Elaine.

Yes, dear Lord yes, he'd have to remember that. He wrote a note to himself to be sure and remember the promised advance copy. He then taped the note and card prominently to the bar.

Picking up the photographs again, he bypassed those of Maxie, examining instead the shots of the wino. Good work, he thought. Damn good work. The hardest part would be choosing which to use.

A memory tugged at his mind. There was something familiar about the old man. He shuffled through them again. Something, but

what? He dealt the nine pictures across the coffee table, then sat looking from one to another, and back again.

On impulse he reached under the photos and found Living II. He flipped half way into the book. Nashville. There it was in black and white on page 47. "REB" the print proclaimed. Johnathan grabbed one of the prints and put it next to the book; same toothless grin, same scar under the left eye. Hell, even the same cap and clothing.

No doubt about it. The man last night had been Reb. How, for that matter, why would would he leave Nashville for Boston? It was October. Why leave the warmth of Tennessee for the bone chilling temperatures of Massachusetts?

"Damn," he said aloud. If only he had recognized the man last night. What an ending that would have made. *A survivor*. A survivor who had traveled a thousand miles no less. His mind's eye could already see what he'd lost: Last page, Reb's toothless grin, perhaps a page explaining how and why he drifted here. Damn-damn-damn.

Another memory, this one fully formed, arrived bringing with it a shiver for his spine. He had liked Reb. A broken dreamer with stories of the old Nashville, and what he called "the real Grand Ole Opry." Broken perhaps, but not bitter. Reb had seemed content with his lot in life.

"Reb, if I ever get back to Nashville, I'll buy you a drink," his voice echoed in his head.

"In case ya don't come back, next time I'm in Boston (pronounced *Bosstia*), I'll look ya'll up." The old man had tipped his head back in laughter then.

Sweet Mother of God, he'd done that all right. No, he told himself, just a coincidence, that's all. *Maybe-maybe not; but you damn sure bought him that drink, didn't you?*

With shaking hands, Johnathan put the pictures away. He found his unwashed glass from the night before and poured himself a double. With one swift motion it was gone.

Time to put an end to it, he thought. It had become a game, a damn dangerous game. And it was getting too freaky.

Counting last night, he had 108 subjects. The book only needed a hundred. It was time to weed out the weakest prints and end the game.

The eight weakest weeded out. Eight people killed for nothing. Dispatched, he argued. killed-murdered.

11:00 p.m., Johnathan had been driving for three hours. The game was over, no more dispatching. "murder" a small voice said. Call it what you will, he countered, it's over. All that remained was a cover shot. Something that would portray the hopelessness of street life. A living death, not death itself. A corpse on the cover would never do.

On the passenger seat lay two exposed rolls of film. Sixty-four pictures, he thought, and not a one of them any damn good. He didn't know exactly what he wanted; only that he would know it when he saw it.

He drove down Washington Street, the heart of Boston's *Combat Zone*. Bright light coming from an alley to his right caught his attention. Circling the block, Johnathan slowed the car to a near crawl to better survey the sight.

BINGO! He saw it *and* he knew it! A fifty-five gallon drum was ablaze with flames licking three feet into the air. Around the bonfire there were maybe twenty people seeking its warmth from the cold October night.

Perfect. "Thank you God," he prayed to no one. Johnathan pulled the car under a street light, checked the locks, and got out. A fresh roll was installed in the camera. He patted his jacket pockets, both of them contained one hundred and fifty dollars in fives. Payoff money for the pictures. In this area, five dollars to the right person could buy you almost anything. For ten, your darkest desires could be fulfilled, from any form of perverse sex . . . to murder.

As he neared, camera ready, Johnathan took an informal count; at least thirty people. Highly unusual. Street people clung together sure, but usually in groups of no more than five or so. A special event? . . . *If you go into the woods today, you better go in disguise . . .*

He made his way toward the barrel and the center of their attention. Silently, bodies stepped to the sides allowing him to pass through. He arrived, and turned his back to the flames. Shadows danced grotesquely on the silent faces staring back at him.

"I mean no harm," he said. "I've got a five dollar bill for anyone who will allow me to take their picture."

Silence.

Johnathan calculated. "All right, two five dollar bills. Ten dollars to any and all of you who will allow your picture to be taken."

Silence.

He closed his eyes tight, then opened them

again. His first count had been wrong. There were at least fifty or sixty people. He looked into the surrounding shadows. *More were approaching.* The mob closed in, making room for the newcomers. Seventy, eighty; Oh Sweet Lord God Almighty, there were better than a hundred. From the mass, a hand appeared snatching the camera.

"Hey, that's mine!"

Silence.

"Is it money? I'll give you all of it. I've got more, just let me get to my car."

Silence. The crowd tightened even more.

From the heart of the mob movement could be seen.

"Johnnie? Hey, Johnnie." The voice came from the movement. Someone was approaching.

The crowd rippled like still water disturbed. The voice got nearer. "Johnnie? Com'on answer me boy." The ripple reached the front line and opened. A frail old man carrying two coffee cans stumbled stiffly forward. A frail old man wearing an all too familiar cap embossed with the stars and bars.

"Johnnie, you owe me a drink. You promised me a drink, Johnnie boy. You promised." The hand raised the coffee cans simultaneously.

Johnathan watched in slow motion as amber liquid arched from them and splashed over his face and chest, GASOLINE!, his senses hammered home.

The old man dropped the cans. "You promised me a drink." He removed his cap revealing a small neat hole in his forehead encrusted with a mixture of crimson and black. Something grayish started to fall from the hole. The old man pushed it back in with his index finger and replaced the cap. "Lately I've been a bit scatter-brained," he grinned through blackened gums.

"Reb?" Johnathan's mind searched for something stable; dangerously close to meltdown.

"You promised Johnnie."

Other cans appeared with an ocean of slow motion splashes.

A little girl, perhaps thirteen, appeared before him, a hypodermic needle dangling from her arms.

He remembered. In picture perfect quality, he remembered, Miami: she'd been hooking to support her habit. "Got twenty bucks, mister? Make you feel real good." He'd wanted to vomit. That was no life for a child.

"Twenty bucks, mister? Ten? Please."

Instead he gave her a hypo full of one hundred percent pure gonzo juice. She'd grabbed it like a starving dog on a bone, tied her arm and jabbed. Moments later her eyes became glassy. She knew. It was over and she knew. "Thank you, mister." She had smiled then. The happy smile of a child again, of relief. She drifted off to endless sleep; where no one could hurt her again.

He'd felt good about that one. No way a child should live like that. No way to heal those scars. He'd helped her.

"Help me," he whispered weakly, reaching for the girl.

She smiled. "It's a helluva trip, mister. A helluva trip." She pushed him back into the flames.

Johnathan's mind had given up and gone on to greener pastures. He was only marginally aware of the pain as the flames engulfed his gasoline soaked body. There was a sudden

WITNESS TO THE BIZARRE



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sweet/sour smell. *Uh-oh, momma's burning the roast again. He danced an epileptic jig to the bubbling sound of fat frying.*

There was pain, he was sure of it, though he felt nothing. Flames raced up his chest, covering his face. Through them, he began to recognize the faces—Denver, Washington D.C., Hollywood. Somewhere beyond he could see flashes of white light—heaven?

Suddenly, with two small pops, his eyes exploded.

"Sign here, please."

Elaine Richards signed where told and received the package from the James Sheridan Publishing Company. She hurried inside, eager to see what it might contain.

She tore open the package. Inside, lay a copy of *End Of The Line*, the final volume of the Johnathan Bryant trilogy, along with a brief letter:

Dear Mrs. Richards,

After the tragic death of Johnathan Bryant, a note was found in his apartment reminding himself to send you an advanced copy of *EOTL*. It is unfortunate that he was never allowed to do so. I am sure the police have badgered you with this information. We here at James Sheridan hope this advanced copy will

convey our thanks.

Best Wishes,

Rick Wesley, Ed.

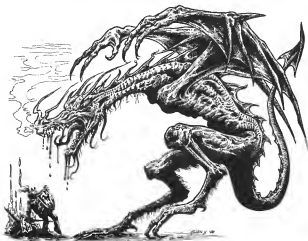
The last six photographs were from Johnathan's camera, which was found beside his body. The first showed Johnathan standing alone in front of a flaming barrel. The next—his face twisted in fear as flames rose up his back. The following three showed a human torch doing a dance of death. The sixth—a reporter's shot of the body covered with a coroner's sheet.

She already knew the story, having read it in *PEOPLE* the week of his death: In truth, there were thirty-six pictures, a complete roll of film documenting the entire grisly affair from its start to finish, including three of the charred, still smoldering, corpse.

The article had asked what kind of animal could have set a man on fire in a vacant alley, and then stood by and photographed the entire event.

As she viewed the photographs again, Elaine remembered the question raised by the magazine: Had Johnathan Bryant known his death was being recorded; had he somehow, through the flames, seen perhaps the flash?

Elaine closed the book and wept.



A CONVERSATION WITH



STEVE RASNIC TEM

STEVE RASNIC TEM's moody fiction has appeared in dozens of horror magazines and anthologies — The Cutting Edge, Shadows, Night Visions, Best of Masques, Halloween Horrors, Gorezone, New Blood — and has earned him the title of horror's top short fiction writer. His short tale, "The Double," appeared in the premiere issue of Cemetery Dance. Tem's debut novel, Excavation, was published last year, and he is currently working on several others.

After this interview, read Tem's most recent masterpiece, "Markers," written especially for CEMETERY DANCE readers!

CEMETERY DANCE: How long have you been writing? Was there any special moment in your life when you knew writing was going to be your career?

TEM: I've been writing, arranging words into stories, about as long as I've been able to read. When I was a kid I'd write the stories—a page or two at the most—into tablets, illustrate them, color them, that sort of thing. Dreamy things mostly, all of them fantasies as I recall. Around the age of twelve I got interested in puppetry, and wrote plays for puppets I bought or made. I first started sending things out late in high school, and got a little encouragement from Ted White at *Amazing*. Once I went to college I wrote poetry almost exclusively, took a few undergraduate writing courses, thought about being a chemist, a teacher, an actor, lots of things, but wasn't really sure I could do anything for long—I was a bit too manic and disorganized, a bit too unconventional, to hold down a 9-to-5 job. What I wanted to do was translate my imagination into something concrete, to make my imagination my living. But I didn't know if I was good enough. My reason for going to graduate school with a creative writing major was to find out exactly that. I wasn't sure if they could teach me anything, but I thought at least I might get a sense of whether I was good enough or not.

CD: Do you still write poetry?

TEM: All the time—but I send out very little of it anymore. Although I have confidence in my fictional "voice," I've never felt that I've found my

ideal voice for poetry—a matter of line breaks, emphasis, etc. that is fully my expression. So rather than submit mediocre stuff, the last few years I've kept most of it to myself.

Occasionally you'll be seeing poems by me (there's a new one in Ellen Dettlow's anthology *Blood is Not Enough*) but not often, although I try to get a lot of poetry into my prose. And I'd like to publish a collection of poems—there've been nibbles in the past from small presses, but so far no one has committed. Maybe someday . . .

CD: What attracted you to horror in the first place?

TEM: It seemed the best way to tell the truth about certain dark aspects of our psychology and spirits, a lot better way than most nonfictional accounts.

CD: What was your first sale? Did you experience immediate success or was it a slow process?

TEM: My first genre sale was "City Fishing" to Ramsey Campbell's *New Terrors*. But I'd already published a lot of poems and a number of quirky little prose pieces in the university and literary magazines. I've had lots of stories rejected, so I'd hardly call my success immediate. I've tended to learn by doing—I find I can't even read some of my early stuff. The number of stories I've sold so far (around 150) is a very small part of all the words I've put on paper over the years.

CD: What are your writing habits? Day or night? Music?

TEM: My writing schedule has

varied considerably over the years—I've tried an 8-5 day schedule, and a 4 a.m. to 7:30 a.m. night schedule when I had a full-time job. Currently I'm writing from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. (with interruptions for mail, lunch, my daughter's arrival home from school, etc.), then again from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m., then again from 11 p.m. to 2 or 3 a.m. Miscellaneous writing and chores get done on weekends. I'm beginning to think I have a nocturnal orientation, so this last schedule may stay. Who knows? It depends in part on the needs of my family.

As for music—I experiment with it: usually I listen to classical or (I hate to admit it) "space" music when I'm composing, rock when I'm revising. But sometimes I try to match the music to the story—country if that's what my characters would be listening to, Christmas music if the story takes place during that season, no-holds-barred, hard-hitting, "nasty" rock if it's that kind of story. And for some stories I need absolute silence. In the same way, I experiment with using different computers and writing environments for particular stories (We have five computers in the house)—I sometimes even—god forbid it—write things long-hand.

CD: What was it like working on *Excavation*? What did you find particularly difficult with the novel?

TEM: It was interesting, mainly because I'd never seriously tried to write a novel before, and I thought it was time. The main reason for writing *Excavation* was to find out if I liked writing a novel (I did), and if I could do it well

(that, of course, will always be a matter of opinion). What was difficult, of course, was that there were structural and pacing challenges that never came up writing short stories. I'll be doing more novels simply because I have stories I want to tell which require that form (just as there are story ideas and outlines in my files which I believe will require a play, screenplay, or comic book form—and there's a certain frustration in not having written them yet—some things just want to be born). And I think there are certain aesthetic challenges in the horror novels I want to tackle. So, hopefully, in the future you will be seeing novels from me with titles like *Deadfall Hotel*, *Ubo Ubo*, *Kisses*, *Lost Children*, etc. Those are the ones I'm working on, now.

CD: Your wife also writes horror fiction. Do you show her your work and vice-versa? How involved are the two of you in each others writing process?

TEM: Yes, Melanie has always written pretty much whatever the story required, without thought to what genre the story was "supposed" to be, and in the last couple of years a lot of her fiction has just tended to be more recognizably "horror" fiction, with horror tales in/or forthcoming in *Women of Darkness I & II*, *Whispers*, *Fantasy Tales* (England), Lisa Tuttle's forthcoming feminist horror anthology from England's Women's Press, *Asimov's*, etc. We've always shown each other everything we've written, and if there's one editor who's had the greatest influence on me—who's made me revise more—it's Melanie. She's the best line-

by-line editor I know. We also share common ideas about what constitutes good writing, which makes it relatively easy to collaborate.

CD: What authors hold honored positions on your bookshelves? Who are the under-rated writers of the macabre?

TEM: I always buy and read everything by Charlie Grant, Steve King, Ramsey Campbell, Harlan Ellison, Shirley Jackson, M.R. James to mention a very few—there's lots of good people out there. I find the under- and over-rated issue almost impossible to address: most of the major writers in this field have been both under- and over-rated in some respects: it seems to go with the territory. New writers in horror and fantasy and science fiction are almost always overpraised at first, then a couple of years later are over-criticized. And there's critical acclaim and sales, and those two things aren't mutually exclusive, but they seem to have little connection. It drives some writers nuts I guess, which is why it's not worth worrying about. You should just write the stories against some standard of inner vision and try to cut the most satisfying deal you can. Now, if I were pressed to mention writers who aren't getting as much attention as I think they deserve, Thomas Ligotti and Al Sarrantonio are two that would come to mind.

CD: Do you enjoy horror films? Which have you especially liked? Disliked?

TEM: I love films, period. Although surprisingly enough, I think the very literalness of film leeches a lot of the com-

plexity out of horror, with the exception of a handful of directors (Cronenberg being one of those). A lot of the most popular horror films I see as "raw material" as opposed to objects of art. They reflect people's fears and paranoia without providing us with the images which will transform us and make those fears and that violence more understandable. Which doesn't mean I don't like them—I find them useful as raw materials, as barometers—and sometimes they're just plain fun. But I view them as "newsreels" of a sort, of our fears and desperation—which limits their value. To me the difference between *I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE*, *LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT*, and most of the *FRIDAY THE 13TH* series on the one hand, and such films as *REPULSION*, *SEIZURE* and *ERASERHEAD* on the other, is analogous to the difference between the six o'clock news and novels like *Red Dragon* and *The Wasp Factory*. I watch the six o'clock news every night—there's important information there for me—but I get more out of Thomas Harris and Ian Banks.

CD: What do you think of the much publicized "splatterpunk" movement?

TEM: I think movements within any genre with the potential of stirring things up a bit are healthy for that genre, although not always for the writers directly involved—you can get "trapped" in a movement, and it can limit your work. I also think horror fiction had become somewhat complacent and conservative. However, I don't think "splatterpunk" was ever a legitimate movement in the same way that "cyberpunk" was in science

fiction. I haven't seen a lot of theory coming out of splatterpunk, except for a few scattered quotes in articles. And I've never understood the selection of some of the writers for inclusion in the group. Richard Christian Matheson is often included, and I'm a big fan of his, but I'll be damned if I can find anything in his approach even remotely similar to the others. Skipp & Spector, Ray Garton, David Schow, Joe Lansdale, and Rick McCammon—fine men all—may have some superficial similarities in their writings, but I think those similarities remain superficial. Clive Barker is thought by many to be the quintessential splatterpunk writer, but I think that's because his writing is often badly misunderstood. What is key to Barker's talent is the often startling, transforming originality of his imagery, not its violence.

I read and admire the work of most of the so-called splatterpunks. I admire any writing that takes risks—I admire the risks Barker takes with imagery, the risks Schow takes with language, the risks Lansdale takes with characterization. I hope if there's a lasting splatterpunk effect, it will be because of the risk-taking by these individual authors.

CD: "The Boxer" was a per-

ticularly gruesome short story (*New Blood* #4). Where did the idea come from?

TEM: I've always paid close attention to derelicts, street people, etc. In part that's because of some of the hotels and rooming houses I lived in before I was married, and in part because there's some sort of personal symbology there I've never quite understood. I was sitting on a bench on Denver's 16th street mall one day, when this angry young fellow came by—greasy hair, hundred-yard stare, his clothes barely hanging on him. But what caught my attention was his face: there was this large patch of skin on his forehead, peeling away, showing raw, red skin underneath. He kept picking at it, making it worse, mumbling to himself—and what I imagined he was angry about was that weird skin condition he had. I'd been sitting there thinking it had been a while since I'd written a really cranky, nasty story, and then he comes shambling into my life—I wrote the entire first draft that afternoon.

CD: Okay, let's close with something wonderfully original and fresh. What advice would you give to a new writer trying to break through in the horror genre?

TEM: I think there are a couple

of things essential to any writer, whatever the genre. One is an extensive repertoire of different ways of telling a story. And the only way to build this repertoire is to read as much as possible, and as much as possible outside the genre. Two, is an original voice. You may be able to publish without one, but as far as I'm concerned if you don't have that voice you don't have much of anything. You can't really learn it, but you can nurture it. Find something in your writing that's uniquely yours, something different from the way most other writers do things, and develop it, expand on it, and if possible build a fictional approach out of it. It may be a bit one-dimensional at first, but if you're good, after a time it will develop into something more complex.

But most importantly, write, even when you're writing crap and you know you're writing crap. The skills and the voice do not come without lots of words put down on paper—thinking about it "until you're good enough" just doesn't work.

And don't be afraid, or too proud, to revise. Once a writer, however good or well-known, becomes above revision, that writer ceases to grow, in my opinion. I think you always have to think of yourself as a bit of a student.



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MARKERS

Willy was familiar with this place; he had been here many times in his dreams, like this, after dark. So many times, in fact, that the markers, the stones, felt like part of his own body. Part of his backbone, pressing so hard against his thin, fatless skin that he was afraid they were going to burst through at any second. The stones ground together in his stomach until he was sick. The stones clacked together in his brain until he thought his head might split.

ABIGAIL, LOYAL WIFE OF JOHN

"Willy!"

Willy could not believe his mother was dead. He had seen her lying there, all still, stiller than sleep, still the way a doll or statue was still. And they all told him his mother was dead. His father and grandmother had told him. Softly at first, but then his father had gotten louder and louder and finally started crying when Willy kept saying "no."

They had the same conversation before and after the funeral. Willy and his dad and Grandmother and the doctor and the minister, all of them sitting in the livingroom so sad and serious it made Willy nervous, and when Willy got real nervous he started to laugh, and when he started laughing after the funeral they looked at him funny and pulled him into the livingroom for another talk.

"We buried your mother today, William," Grandmother had said, but Willy just kept saying no no no and finally ran out of the house. To here. Where it was almost night.

"Willy! Willy, please!" There were several of them out there looking for him, calling him, but he stayed quiet, hiding behind the headstones.

His mother *couldn't* be dead. She was the one who had given him the name "Willy." His dad called him "Bill" and his grandmother always said "William," do this and that. But finally everybody but Grandmother started calling him Willy because his mother gave him that name. They *still* called him Willy so his mother couldn't be dead. If his mother was

dead, then he didn't even have a name anymore.

"Willy! It's getting dark! You have to come in!"

But Willy knew that now, of all times, he didn't *have* to do anything.

OUR MOTHER, IN ETERNAL REPOSE

Willy didn't believe they ever *really* buried anyone. That was just a lie. The adults kept all the bodies hidden away someplace, probably in a giant building far away, where the kids couldn't see them or talk to them. Where the mothers were hidden away so that they couldn't read you bedtime stories anymore, and where the fathers couldn't give you rides on their shoulders.

But if his mother *really were* here then maybe she could tell him what the truth was. And maybe she could get all the others who stayed here now to tell him things, too. Right now Willy felt closer to these stones than to any living relative, especially his father. His father didn't pay attention, didn't even talk to Willy much, until his mother was gone. Disappeared. Kidnapped by robbers. But he would never believe . . . dead.

The lie on the stone said "Abigail." His mother's name was *Abby*. Willy had never heard anybody call his mother Abigail. It was just another adult lie.

HERE LIES THE BODY OF SIMON APPLEGATE

This headstone was old. Dark and mossy and cracked, it was probably just about the oldest headstone in the cemetery. Willy wondered if the man's body was still there. And if the body was still there, then maybe it could speak to him, tell him about itself, how things had been when that body was up out of the ground, walking around. Maybe it would even know where they'd hidden his mother away. All the headstones looked like secrets; some of them were just older, longer-kept secrets than the others.

Willy put his head against the ground below the headstone. He wondered where Simon

Applegate's chest must be, if maybe right below the earth, right below Willy's ear, was Simon Applegate's stone heart. He wondered about Simon Applegate's lips, if they looked like earthworms, and if the whispers that might come out of those lips would be soiled, full of earth.

He tried to imagine his mother's lips as earthworms, but he couldn't do it. His mother's lips were soft and warm, and nibbled at his cheek when she kissed him.

DEPOSITED BENEATH THIS STONE THE MORTAL PART OF MATTHEW BANKIER

When his hamster had died, his mother had held his shoulders while Willy flushed the body down the commode. He had cried a little, and he had cried even more when he knew he *liked* watching the hamster's body swirling round and around the twisting tunnel of water. It was like his hamster was on a carnival ride. It was like an adventure. Like dying was an adventure. But then his hamster disappeared. Just like his mother, when they'd closed the lid.

His mother always pinched the blossoms off the flowers so that they would grow better. He hated that. He wondered where all the colors went. Every winter he would wonder if all the colors were just waiting under the snow. If the ground hadn't been frozen, maybe he could free them. Once or twice he'd tried, but he never could get the shovel into the hard dirt.

He wondered if his mother was waiting for him under the ground, needing him to go get his father's old shovel and help her escape.

UNIVERSALLY LAMENTED

After a few hours it seemed like the stones were getting used to Willy. There weren't any other people around now, so maybe the stones felt it was safe to talk. To whisper. To have the low, mumbled conversations all headstones must have after all the guests from the funeral have left.

Willy kept listening for his mother's voice, and although he heard many soft, women's voices, many mothers even, calling their children in for supper, or singing them to sleep, he did not hear his mother's voice.

IN MEMORY OF MARY

My sweet child . . .

The stone had flowers carved on it. He could tell they were supposed to be beautiful flowers, but they were all colorless and cold. His mother said she loved *all* flowers, but maybe even she could not love flowers like these.

My baby . . .

Willy would have been this woman's—Mary's—baby, if he could, he so liked the sound of her voice, but he had a mother, so he was very very sorry, but he could not stay. He had to go to the next stone, and then the next, to every headstone in the cemetery if he had to, until he found one that could tell him something about where his mother had gone.

Baby . . .

HENRY FELLOWES, LATE OF WILLIAMSTOWN

A man was riding on a horse in the old, yellow-stained picture. Willy didn't like photographs on headstones—they felt like a mean joke. He could smell a strong smell of tobacco, just like Great Grandfather had had before he, too, had disappeared. After-shave. Eucalyptus cough drops. Willy liked the mixture of smells, but the man in the photograph wouldn't tell him anything, no matter how much he asked, so Willy went on.

THIS WINGED SKULL

The illustration on the stone gave Willy a creepy feeling. A lot of the older headstones had a carving like that. He wasn't sure what it was supposed to mean. Like a picture of what your head feels like when you're sick, or a little dizzy, your head floating around, your eyes too large, and too empty, for the room you're in. You can't trust what you see when you're feeling sick like that. And it's like you're all *dead*, with no body at all.

Maybe it was a picture of what your head looked like after you were dead.

His mother always took real good care of him when he was sick. She'd bathe him and hold him and whisper little secrets—secrets just for the two of them—that made him feel better.

Without his mother around to take care of him, maybe his head would grow wings, too,



ROSTERNALLOS

and fly off somewhere. Maybe without his mother around to take care of him, Willy would die.

MOMENTO MORI

A few of the stones had strange words on them. Like a special code, a key to all secrets. A special code to make the headstone open up like a door and let you inside. Willy spent a long time standing on those graves, staring at those strange words, hoping maybe someone would whisper the meaning of the message to him, so he could break the code and find out where they had hidden his mother. But no one ever told him a thing.

BRAVE FREDERICK, WHO DIED IN DEFENSE OF HIS CHILDREN

Frederick's kids should have stayed out of trouble. Kids were always getting into trouble. Willy wondered if Frederick's kids ever felt it had been their fault.

BENEATH THIS STONE ANGEL

But it wasn't a very friendly looking angel. The stone eyes were huge, the nose bulbous, the mouth a deeply carved frown that would be there forever. But it sang songs a little like his mother's. It had a voice a little like his mother's, a little like all the other buried voices in the cemetery. Several of the stones had pictures of this angel, or the angel's sisters. (Could an angel be male? For some reason he could not understand, Willy didn't think so.) So he began to wonder if maybe this was the guardian angel of his mother's cemetery.

He wondered how much this angel was like the real angels of heaven. His grandmother always talked about the angels in heaven. She'd even said that that was where Willy's mother was now, that she was "with the angels in Heaven." *She's with the angels now . . . don't worry yourself. Let the angels take care of her . . .* His grandmother wanted him to feel better, but he just couldn't feel better right now.

If anything, he thought true angels must be far bigger than the ones on these headstones. They must be ten, twelve feet tall, with wings like a huge bat's, enormous eyes, and long teeth, one or two feet long, dripping poison. They *had* to be like that, so that the dead people would do

whatever they said.

ADDING LUSTRE TO AN AMIABLE CHARACTER, BY SUSTAINING HER LAST ILLNESS WITH CHRISTIAN RESIGNATION

Willy soon got tired of going from stone to stone, looking for his mother, or at least information concerning where his mother might be hiding. There must have been hundreds of stones in the cemetery, maybe even thousands, and once the cemetery filled up he thought maybe they just brought in more dirt and planted more stones on top of the old ones. Who knew how many stones there were here under all those layers, how many dead people? Maybe millions. He'd never find his mother among so many.

He started ignoring some of the stones, paying closer attention to others, running to them at random, following the voices inside the graves, listening especially to the saddest ones, and the ones who were so angry even their dead whispers made the ground shake.

Sometimes he ran so hard he had to stop and rest, lying on a cool grave, his head leaning on the stone.

MOURNFUL PARENTS HERE I LIE AS YOU ARE NOW SO ONCE WAS I AS I AM NOW SO YOU MUST BE

He stared sadly into the little boy's eyes. The gray little boy was dressed in old-fashioned clothes, and sang old-fashioned songs to himself. Willy thought maybe the songs were to keep him from feeling so lonely. Willy thought maybe the songs gave the little boy a way of crying, without really seeming to cry. Willy had never had a friend his own age. He knew that children died—it was on the news and in movies; he just hadn't known of any personally.

He looked around, but couldn't find the graves of the little boy's parents. They couldn't still be alive—the grave was quite old. Maybe they had moved away after the boy died, so that they wouldn't remember so much. Willy didn't think that could have worked. Memories were like graveyards: the stones were everywhere. You couldn't step without tripping over a headstone, old or new.

The boy's songs rose and fell like the ocean. They got down into Willy's ears and throat. They got down as far as his belly and

then they made him feel bad. He ran away from the gray, singing boy, but couldn't keep himself from being sick in the tall weeds that surrounded part of the cemetery. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and started running again, afraid of his dark corner of the cemetery.

IN MEMORY OF THE WIDOW SARAH COTTON

Willy ran and ran, accidentally fell into the pale woman's arms. He didn't scream, and that surprised him. He'd become used to them, he guessed. But finally he had to squirm his way out of her embrace; her fingers pulled at him, pinching his skin, and that did scare him a little. He was very very sorry, but he had to find his own mother. When he finally broke away the woman disappeared with a great sob, but her sweet smell stayed behind, and clung to his clothes much as her fingers had.

MY GLASS IS RUN

He stumbled again and again over hidden parts of stones. He could see a little bit of light on the horizon, and once day came he knew his father and grandmother would probably find him. He grew sick with panic. He fell face first into the dirt, and got up with a mouth full of grave.

IN REMEMBRANCE OF PHILIP YATES, WHO WAS KILLED BY LIGHTNING

Willy had known this man. He'd been about the age of Willy's grandmother, and he used to work on the flower gardens in the park. Willy used to stop and watch him on his way home from school, and once Mr. Yates had given Willy some flowers to take home to his mother, just because Willy had asked.

The story about Mr. Yates getting struck by lightning had been on the front page of the town paper. It had made his mother real sad. It would have made Willy real sad, too, and it did, some, but at the time he really didn't understand what it was all about. At the time he didn't understand why they just didn't dig Mr. Yates up and take him to the hospital and fix him. Why they just didn't put a machine inside him that would make him work again.

Now he knew. When his mother disappeared, for some reason, he knew things didn't work that way.

Mrs. Yates stopped going outside anymore.

His mother told Willy there were too many memories for her—she couldn't get away from them. Mr. Yates' daughter, who had been in college, came back to take care of Mrs. Yates. You almost never saw her either. Willy's dad had said that the two of them might as well move out to the cemetery and live there. Willy's mom had told his dad to hush up. Willy's grandmother had said that some people spend half their lives in graveyards. That sounded like something true to Willy, but he wasn't really sure what it meant.

Willy stared at Mr. Yates' grave, and wondered what it would be like to see that stone in your mind all the time. The longer he looked at the stone, the more it resembled Mr. Yates' wide, white face, looking at Willy as he handed him the flowers that day. Willy imagined what it would be like to have your head full of all these stones, a graveyard full of stones that looked like people's faces, maybe that even looked like people's whole lives. Willy knew.

He turned his head and walked away slowly. He didn't want to hurt Mr. Yates' feelings any, but Willy could feel him staring at him.

IN THE COLD BED OF DEATH FREE FROM TROUBLE AND PAIN

His mother had always hated sleeping. There was just too much to do in a day, she said; she didn't have time for sleeping. Willy could do the sleeping for the both of them, she said. It wasn't fair she had to sleep now, no matter what his grandmother said.

DEATH IS A DEBT TO NATURE DUE WHICH I HAVE PAID AND SO MUST YOU

His father told him that life wasn't fair. It didn't seem to Willy that death was very fair either.

"Mom!" It was late and there weren't any adults around—no one wanted to live next to the cemetery, he guessed. So he didn't think anyone would hear him.

They answered. One at a time, and then whole groups of them, sounding like the choir at Grandmother's church. They were alone, the voices told him. They wanted him to spend some time with them. But he knew that none of the voices, coming out of the ground, coming out of the stones, coming out of the leaves blowing down from the trees and catching on the black

iron fence, was his mother's.

DEAR CHILDREN REMEMBER THAT YOUR MOTHER LIES HERE

Where? He wondered if those children at least knew where their mother was, or if they had been lied to, too. He wanted to meet them and ask them when was the last time they had seen their mother, talked with her, held her hand.

Now and then, passing by a stone, Willy felt a light touch on his arm, his leg. A touch like a twig catching on his clothes, or a leaf pressed against his bare skin by the wind. They wanted to hold him here. They wanted to get inside his head and live there forever.

More than ever Willy wanted to run away from the stones, but he had to find his mother first. He found himself running again, faster and faster, looking at every stone for just a second, trying to find his mother's face in the stone, then running away before the others, the ones not his mother, could touch him. He'd already forgotten where the grave was where they'd lied and said they'd buried his mother.

THERE IS REST IN HEAVEN

Willy couldn't run any farther. All his breath had run out of him. His chest hurt, like he was breathing pain in and out of his body, not air.

He felt like giving up, and lying down among all these whispering stones, these dreams and memories, but he was afraid of how it would feel when the shadows touched him. So he kept running, the stones growing fuzzier as he ran, seeming to twist and float away.

IN CONSEQUENCE OF INCURABLE ULCEROUS SORES UNDER WHICH HE PAINFULLY LINGERED IN GREAT AGONY

"At least she didn't suffer," Mrs. Reynolds across the street had said. "We can console ourselves with that."

The pale shapes of the dead twisted and distorted beside him, trying to grab onto him with their deformed fingers and hands. But they couldn't run on their warped and broken legs. They stumbled and fell and rotted on the ground, their cries filling rapidly with dirt.

People's lives get messy, a voice inside him said. *But you can't let the mess get you.*

You'll die that way, Willy. His mother was always telling him things like that, but now he couldn't listen. All those things she had said didn't matter in the end. Her magic words didn't work. His mother was still gone.

Willy suddenly realized that his mother was hiding inside his own head, somewhere under the hardening bones of his skull. He could hear her now, singing him to sleep.

MY WIFE

A finger at the center of the stone pointed upward. It was a terrible lie. The finger could have pointed in any direction.

Inside his head, he could see his mother's smile, stretching so widely it began to give him a headache, the corners of her mouth pushing so hard against the inside of his head, leaving no room for his own thoughts or feelings.

But he had his mother now. He began running toward the front gate of the cemetery.

LITTLE ALICE

The little girl with the empty face tried to grab him as he ran toward the gate of the cemetery. He tried to get away, but her arms were very long for her size, and she finally got him, holding on to his wrists so tightly Willy imagined that was the way handcuffs must feel.

She whispered into his ear that she was going to kiss him. Willy turned his face to her then. Sharp, curved teeth suddenly sprouted all around the edges of her empty, oval face, her face becoming a huge mouth ready to eat his head.

Willy's mouth flew open, stretching wider the louder he screamed, so that suddenly he was afraid he might swallow her instead.

He felt his head stretching, his hair pulling, and suddenly his mother was coming out of his scalp, growing out of his hair, dragging herself up and out of him as she cried: *What's wrong, Willy? Did you have a nightmare again, honey?* Like all those other nights so long ago when she had gotten up to hold him when he'd cried out in the night.

0° RELENTLESS DEATH

Before he knew it was happening Willy was past the gate, and staring back at his mother, who was unable to leave. And as much

(Continued on page 54)

LITTLE PRECIOUS

TOM ELLIOTT crashed upon the horror scene with his impressive debut novel, **THE DWELLING** (St. Martin's Press). His chilling fiction will appear soon in **NEW BLOOD**, **GRUE**, **HAUNTS**, **OCTOBER DREAMS**, **NOT ONE OF US**, and many other publications. In addition to working with Chris Lacher on the forthcoming anthology **DEADERS**, he is currently at work on two new novels, **MISSIONARY MAN** and **POSTHUMOUS**. The following tale, "Little Precious," manages to be touching and gruesome, at the same time. Elliott is a native and resident of southern California.

All flesh is grass, Hermione Rosenblum reminded herself often these days. Jonathon had proven that fifteen years ago; most of her friends had also gone on to their rewards. Hermione knew it would be her turn all too soon.

What worried her most, however, was not her own mortality, but that her Little Precious would most certainly perish quickly in his loneliness and despair.

She had tried to convince herself that he was just a dog, and that her death would mean little to him, but she had never succeeded in believing that. He understood her, really understood her. It was as plain as the nose on your face.

He would listen to her for hours, cocking his little doggy head to one side as Hermione regaled him with tales of the bridge club peccadillos. He seemed to understand, with those big liquid eyes eagerly hanging on her every word. The case worker from the county listened to her, too, but behind the woman's smile, Hermione knew she was laughing at an old widow's dependence on a dog. Thank God she only had to put up with the woman's intolerable tolerance once a month.

Whenever she told Little Precious about that slut Martha Beadreaux, living openly with a widower ten years her junior, he always blinked twice, very clearly indicating that he shared her disapproval. And when Hermione complained to him about the smart-aleck kid who bagged groceries at Safeway, who chewed

gum and had no respect for the elderly, Little Precious breathed a weighty little sigh, as if to show his disappointment at the world.

Hermione flicked the remote control, cutting Oprah off mid-sentence, and in the silence of her apartment considered Little Precious. He was sleeping on his pillow wedged in one corner of the sofa. For the past twelve years, she and Little Precious had weathered the exigencies of retired life together. He was her friend, her confidante (not that she had much to confide at her age, thank you very much); he had been the tiny body that warmed the bed next to her. He understood her. And the case worker could believe that or not.

Hermione sighed; she was going to die soon. She felt it the way the old sometimes do; she felt it in her joints, she felt it in her belly. And what would become of Little Precious then? Who would care for him as she did? She had considered having him put to sleep, ending his tiny life before he had to face life without her. She'd even made the appointment with the vet, but when she'd actually gotten in the car, with Little Precious perched trustingly between the seat-back and her shoulder, watching the world pass by, shivering with excitement as chihuahuas often do, she found she simply could not do it; it felt too much like murder. So she'd driven around aimlessly, ignoring the angry expressions on the faces of the other drivers that passed her. What did they know? I'm just an old lady, trying to get by, she thought at them, but they always pulled away too fast, pitiless in their hurry to get some place.

On the sofa Little Precious whimpered in his sleep; he knows what I'm thinking, Hermione thought. She sighed pitifully, and heaved her bulk up from the Barco-Lounger.

She had taken but one step toward Little Precious when in her chest she felt a sudden thick double-thud. What's happening, she wondered fearfully, raising a withered hand to her throat. As if in answer, a shock of dull pain shot through her left side, and she crumbled to the floor, amazed at the speed in which Death was claiming her.

Dazed but still aware, Hermione knew that

she had to get help quickly; the phone was in the kitchen, but she wondered if she had the strength to make it there. Hermione struggled onto her elbows and dragged herself forward a few inches, a tiny sound much like the sleeping whimper of Little Precious escaping her throat. She glanced over at the sofa; he had stirred at the sound, but still slept on. Good, she decided. I don't want him to see me like this.

With bright dizzy-motes floating before her eyes, Hermione inched her way into the small kitchen. As she passed over the threshold, a wave of vertigo struck her, and she lie there for a long moment, lips tightly compressed, waiting it out. The feeling passed, but took most of her remaining strength with it. The phone was now an unreachable goal; she could never pull herself up to it to summon aid.

In the living room she heard Little Precious whimper again, and sudden burning tears erupted in Hermione's eyes. If she died, right here and now, what would happen to him? The bridge club had broken for the summer, to let its various members visit their grown children, and the case worker had been here just last week. Hermione had no living relatives; but for Little Precious and her memories, she was alone in the world.

Hermione began to crawl toward the cupboard with renewed vigor. If she was to die, the least she could do—her last, dying act—would be to provide for the tiny friend who had given so much of himself to her. His special mix was behind a cupboard door, sealed in a ziplock bag. She would open the bag and pour it in his bowl, and then she could die.

The linoleum was cold and hard against her skin, but she ignored the sensations and the

aching pain as she reached for the countertop. If she could just snag the edge, she might pull herself up long enough to take the special mix down. From there, it was a short walk—or crawl, if she had to—to the dish marked "Little Precious" next to the refrigerator.

But the counter might as well have been at the top of Pikes Peak; she could not reach it, no matter how she strained. After long minutes of heartbreaking effort, she stopped, the injustice of it overwhelming her. She gave herself over to bitter, wracking sobs, praying as she cried: Take me, God, if you must. But why kill such an innocent animal, who never did anything but give love and affection to me, who never asked anything in return?

From the corner of her eye, Hermione spotted the accusingly empty supper dish, neon orange against the green-speckled linoleum. Her sobs diminished, and with a slight nod of her head (as if she'd heard an answer to her silent prayer), she began to crawl toward the dish. Each inch gained was punctuated with a gasp and a whispered "Little Precious."

The darkness was already closing in around her when she reached the dish. Mumbling "I know he understands," she lowered her head into the bowl.

She never felt it when Little Precious came into the kitchen an hour later, his long toenails skittering against the tile, and probed her dead face with his tiny cold nose. Nor did she feel the tender doggy kisses he gave her dead lips.

And she didn't feel a thing several days later, when understanding dawned upon Little Precious.



A CONVERSATION WITH ALFRED R. KLOSTERMAN



Alfred R. Klosterman is one of the most talented and respected artists in the horror genre. It's my pleasure to present him as **CEMETERY DANCE's** first feature artist. His chilling story illustrations/covers have highlighted editions of **THE HORROR SHOW**, **HORRORSTRUCK**, **GRUE**, **NEW BLOOD**, **2AM**, **ELDRITCH TALES**, **FOOTSTEPS**, **THE NIGHTMARE EXPRESS**, **TERROR TIME AGAIN** and many other top publications. Included in the pages of this issue are nine Klosterman illustrations, perfectly-crafted cover art, and the following profile of the man who draws our nightmares.

CEMETERY DANCE: How did you get your start in the small press?

ALFRED KLOSTERMAN: Well, I guess a little background is in order. I was born in 1950, and as soon as I could read, I really got into those great comic books of that era. From there, it was on to **MAD**, **Creepy** and **Eerie**, and then the fantasy and science fiction digests and paperbacks. The 50s and 60s had such great genre artists! Anyway, I knew early on that I *had* to be an artist. I went to art school, and, after some time in the Service, started working as an artist. Really mundane stuff, mostly, but it all helped me develop some skills. About ten years ago, I started hearing about these small publications put out by and for people who, like

me, couldn't get enough of this stuff. I started reading and then contributing to them. Since then, the small press has become a big chunk of my life.

CD: Are you an artist by trade?

AK: I'm employed as a graphic designer/illustrator in Silicon Valley. I produce things like data sheets, catalogs and newsletters. Also a lot of book production. Mostly pretty mundane stuff, but there's an occasional fun project. I'd like to put some of this experience to use in the small press area. I'm slowly putting together a collection of my pieces that I hope to publish during the next year, among other things.

CD: Have you ever attempted any horror writing?

AK: I've been spending more time lately trying my hand at writing. I'm planning on submitting a few pieces in the next few months, so editors be warned! I don't really see a lot of difference in the two areas, they're sort of like two sides of the same coin. It's all putting your ideas on paper—whether it's with a typewriter or a drawing pen—and hoping to reach the reader. It takes a lot of effort to succeed in either.

CD: Who are your favorite artists in the horror genre?

AK: If there's one thing I enjoy as much as drawing, it's looking at other artists' work. My two all-time favorites are Jack Gaughan and Wally Wood. They were a heckuva big influence on me, and I wish I could thank them for their inspiration. Many of my favorites trace back to my growing up in the 50s and 60s. I love

looking at the work of Steve Ditko, Reed Crandall and Frank Frazetta. Virgil Finlay and Ed Emshwiller are two others. These folks covered the whole range of fantasy/horror/science fiction.

I've always been partial to black and white work over color. Fortunately, the small press offers a good chance for artists who prefer to work in black and white. There's some really nice work appearing in the small press. I always enjoy seeing John Borkowski's work. Roger Gerberding is another favorite, as is Allen Koszowski. J.K. Potter and Harry O. Morris are doing knockout work with their photo-illustrations. The small press offers a unique opportunity for artists to reach and grow, and I love to see it happen.

CD: Why do you illustrate horror? Why not

something else, say childrens' books?

AK: That's a tough question, and I'm not really sure how to answer it. I'd say my background is similar to a lot of other fans. Starting with comics, then on to fantasy and science fiction digests and paperbacks, my reading has always been mostly genre stuff. Mainstream children's books just never did anything for me. I preferred staying up late with Karloff, Price, Lorre and Lugosi to sleeping.

It's not that I don't enjoy working in other areas. It's just that nothing else gives that same kick as a good horror or science fiction illustration. It's just more *me*, and what my art is all about.

While my drawing and fiction reading tend to stay in genre, I try to cover a wide range in my non-fiction reading. Special interests include politics, philosophy and science.

SEPARATE WAYS (Can't from page 33)

As she closed the door, she saw him pick up the scalpel. She smiled triumphantly as he hurried up the stairs.

Mel held the scalpel in his right hand and willed his arm to stop trembling. He used his left hand to roll the sock down to where the cold chain looped around his ankle, then took a deep breath, and began to cut.

Ellen grabbed her handbag from behind the sofa and swiftly headed for the garage. She had planned everything down to the smallest detail. The airline ticket to Jamaica was in her handbag. Her bags were packed and loaded into the trunk of the BMW. The car keys were in the ignition, and the garage door was open.

She fought to contain her excitement as she turned out of the driveway. Now was not the

time to attract attention to herself. When she reached the end of the street, she pulled over to the curb. Nervously she glanced down at the clock in the dashboard. Each second seemed an eternity. Her breathing became quick and labored, as if she were nearing sexual orgasm.

There was a deafening explosion behind her. She looked back in time to see her house beginning to crumble. She glanced at the clock. Five and a half minutes had elapsed since she left the basement.

She smiled, then laughed. She laughed until tears streamed down her cheeks and her sides began to ache. She looked up and gazed at herself in the rearview mirror. "That was a very dirty trick, Ellen," she said to her reflection. "You really should have told poor Mel that there was *no way* he could turn off that bomb!"

MARKERS (Can't from page 50)

as he wanted to, he could not bring himself to walk back inside.

Grandmother had told him several times the past few days, "This is very important: we cannot let ourselves forget that she is dead." But it was even worse, wasn't it, for the dead to forget—maybe just for a moment—that they

were dead?

Willy wandered home a little after dawn, thinking about what he should tell his father about where he had been all night. Maybe he should tell his father he'd found his mother. Maybe he should tell his father he'd found a cemetery inside his head.

IN UTERO

DAVID STARKEY's work has appeared in all of the top horror publications, including THE HORROR SHOW, NEW BLOOD, NOCTULPA and ZAM. His perfect-bound novelette, WISHES AND FEARS, was recently released in chapbook format by ZAM Publications. "In Utero" is a perfectly-crafted, particularly gruesome tale of traditional terror.

Dr. Riley explored Claire's bare, swollen belly with practiced hands. Mike sat in the corner of the examination room and watched, chewing habitually at the cuticles of his perpetually bruised thumbs.

"So the pain just stopped—all at once?" Dr. Riley asked.

"Yes," Claire said. "Right before we got here. It just quit."

"And you think the babies were kicking?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "It was like that other time I told you about, but this time it was worse. It felt like all four of the little buggers were kicking as hard as their little legs would kick." She smiled. "They must've been playing a little game," she added. "Well. I sure wish they could find one that wasn't quite so rough."

Dr. Riley smiled vaguely. He continued gently palpating her belly.

"Everything's okay, isn't it?" Mike suddenly asked from the corner. "My wife's okay, isn't she?"

Dr. Riley stepped slowly back from the examination table.

"I'd like to keep her overnight," he finally said. "I want to do a few more tests in the morning—just to make absolutely sure everything's okay."

"Something is wrong, isn't it?" Mike said. He stood up and moved protectively to his wife's side. "Goddamn fertility drugs. They've done something to Claire, haven't they? They've —"

"Mike," Dr. Riley said firmly. "Multiple births are never one-hundred percent predictable. I've explained all this to you

before. I'd simply like to run some more tests. Please don't be alarmed. As far as I can tell, everything is just fine. The extra information could only help us take even better care of Claire."

Mike nodded, then hung his head low, embarrassed at having spoken so harshly.

"Sorry," he said.

"No apology necessary," said Dr. Riley. "I know this is an anxious time for everybody. Tempers flare. We all say things we wish we hadn't."

Dr. Riley smiled, his authoritarian face relaxing momentarily to reveal the warmth and kindness which were the essence of his character. "If you'll stay with her," he said, "I'll see if I can get the ball rolling on finding her a room for tonight."

"Sure," said Mike. "We'll be fine."

Dr. Riley left them, and as the door swooshed shut behind him, Claire was staring anxiously up into her husband's love-filled eyes.

The next morning, after the tests had been completed, Dr. Riley sat in his office and stared at the scattered stacks of computer paper in disbelief.

It wasn't possible.

The tests couldn't be right.

But he'd double-checked the instruments. He'd taken all the readings half a dozen times. And the results were always the same.

They indicated that Claire Johnson was carrying triplets. Not quads. But triplets.

He sat looking at the printouts from two weeks before. Claire had been carrying quads then. He was sure of it. The printouts were perfectly clear. Any half-decent first-year intern would have been able to interpret those results correctly.

He looked again at the printouts from the original tests—the ones he'd administered nearly three months ago. Those printouts indicated that Claire had been carrying quints. He'd told her then that she was going to have either quads or quints—that he wasn't sure which it would be. He'd explained to her that

the early tests produced notoriously unreliable results; but, in private, he would have been willing to bet a tidy sum that Claire had, in fact, been carrying five embryos at the beginning of her pregnancy.

But two days ago, she'd been carrying quads, and now . . .

Were the seemingly missing fetuses actually still inside her? Were they dead? Was that why they didn't show up on the new tests? No. No, that wasn't it. He knew dead fetuses produced definite, identifiable traces on the printouts.

But if they weren't inside her, what had become of them? Were they being resorbed by Claire's own body? No. That was unthinkable. A human couldn't resorb anything as large as a fetus. But that was certainly as plausible an explanation as the next one, wasn't it? The explanation that said Claire had borne two of her fetuses as separate miscarriages and then disposed of them herself. Highly unlikely, to say the least. But there was still *another* possibility, wasn't there? And this one was the possibility that Dr. Riley barely allowed himself to consider.

Mike and Claire were tense as he stood before them.

"I'm afraid I've discovered some complications," Dr. Riley said softly. "And I'm afraid it will be necessary for me to run one more test before I can know exactly what's going on."

He watched Claire's eyes glaze over with a layer of tears. She seemed too frightened, too full of dread, to say a word. Even though she was twenty-seven years old, Claire seemed to him, at that moment, just like a child, a little girl who was eager to play mommy in a make-believe world where everything was always bright and happy. He hesitated before continuing.

"It's a test I wouldn't do under normal circumstances," he said, "but this is an unusual situation, and—"

"What's the test?" asked Mike, almost belligerently.

"It's a simple X-ray," said Dr. Riley. "Generally we avoid using radiation on pregnant women, but since Claire's nearly six months along, and the fetuses are essentially fully formed, I think the risk from the radiation itself is minimal."

"Are my babies all right?" Claire suddenly demanded. "Are they?"

"Please," said Dr. Riley. "Let's do this one last test, and I'll be able to tell you exactly what's going on."

Mike and Claire waited for the results in Claire's hospital room. Claire lay on her back staring at the ceiling, and Mike sat gently stroking her silky brown hair. They'd both given themselves over, for the moment, to their own anxieties, and they were silent, as if enveloped in their own separate clouds of gloom.

For seven years they'd wanted children, longed for them, ached for them, and now that Claire was actually pregnant, now that her belly was swollen to a full and turgid ripeness, something was wrong. Nightmare visions whirled in their heads. Mike saw squirming masses of writhing children—children born with gross deformities—children with no faces, their backs covered with scales, children with two heads, crawling on all fours like bewildered monsters moving down long, gray institutional halls. Mike thought those monsters would have been better off dead, and he wondered if, in fact, they were capable of having similar thoughts about their own fates.

For Claire, the visions were of dead children—mounds of them, rivers of her own tears carrying their bloated bodies along. If only her own children were simply alive, she thought, she wouldn't care if they were blind, or crippled, or never spoke a word. She'd love them anyway, she'd love them more than she'd ever loved anything—those poor babies, those poor helpless things. For an instant, she imagined herself kneeling down over a tiny deformed skeleton, poking it, prodding it, trying to coax it back to life.

The gloom of the visions that enveloped them was growing even more ominous when Dr. Riley walked into their room. He looked tired, and the furrows of a frown seemed almost like incisions which had been cut into his face.

Claire was the first to speak.

"Just tell us," she said. "Just tell us all of it."

But the way the doctor began made her want to stop him, made her want to cover her ears and run from the room.

"Anytime you take a new drug," he said softly. "There is always a certain amount of risk. Side effects are always possible, side effects that may show up only once in ten thousand times, perhaps only once in a hundred thousand. We've administered the same fertil-

ity drug you took to hundreds of other patients in the past—always with great success—but this time, there have been complications.”

Claire and Mike sat staring at him. Claire looked lost, alone, like a child in search of her mother. Mike had both of his hands clinched into tight fists. For a moment, Dr. Riley thought that Mike was considering hitting him.

“Now I can’t say that the drug caused what has happened,” Dr. Riley said. “No one could say that. But the fact is that something extraordinary is going on. It’s my opinion,” he said, pausing as if searching for the words, “that the largest fetus—the strongest one in Claire’s uterus—is killing its unborn brothers and sisters and then devouring them. In fact, the X-rays show the situation with frightening clarity. The largest fetus still has fragments of one of its siblings inside its stomach. If things proceed as they’re going, that one large fetus will consume all of its siblings while they are still in the womb.”

Dr. Riley stopped talking. He looked exhausted. The strain of making his announcement seemed to have shaken him.

Mike and Claire were staring at him in absolute astonishment and revulsion. Claire’s face was pale. Beads of sweat were rolling down her forehead. Mike reached toward her hand, but she jerked it away and pressed it to her mouth.

“The three remaining fetuses are grossly abnormal,” Dr. Riley said wearily. “And I have no alternative but to suggest that Claire have an immediate abortion.”

At that instant Claire sat bolt upright in bed. “No!” she shrieked. “No! I’ve waited so long! I want children! I’ll never have an abortion! Not now! Not ever!”

“Claire,” Dr. Riley said softly. “You’re not carrying children. The X-rays show . . . terrible things, creatures similar to children, but so different from normal human fetuses, so terribly altered that —”

“Shut up!” she screamed. “I won’t listen to this! Of course they’re children! Of course they are! They’re my *dabies*! They’re growing inside *me*! They’re my *dabies*!”

“Claire,” said Mike, as he saw visions of fanged monsters clacking down institutional hallways on long uncut, curling toenails, “Claire, we need to talk about this. We —”

She could see it in Mike’s eyes. She could see it! Mike agreed with the doctor. Her own



KLOSTERMAN/EBB

husband *agreed* with the man who wanted to kill her unborn children.

"Get out!" she shrieked. "Both of you! Get out!"

"Claire," begged Mike. "Just listen to him. He—"

"Nooo!" she moaned. "I can't! Don't make me listen to this! Please! Just leave me alone. Please!" she pleaded. "Go away."

Dr. Riley looked uncertain.

But he touched Mike's shoulder. "Maybe for just a few minutes," he whispered. "To let her sort things through a bit."

Mike nodded slowly.

"Claire," said Dr. Riley. "Mike and I are going to leave you alone for a little while."

"Good!" she screamed. "Good!"

"We'll be back soon," he said gently.

"You can stay away forever for all I care," she sobbed. "Both of you!"

Claire kept on sobbing as they closed the door behind them. Pathetic, garbled, trapped-animal sounds were grinding deep inside her throat.

She would never let them destroy her babies—never. She was finally about to become a mommy—she was carrying her very own children, and no one would take them away from her. She didn't care what was wrong with them. They were hers, and she loved them—loved them no matter what. All four of them. And of course there were four of them. She didn't believe for a minute this nonsense about there being only three. All this talk about deformities. Monstrosities. Nonsense! Not one word of it true!

She pushed the hair back from her face. She wiped her tears away with the backs of her hands.

Then she climbed out of bed and waddled out into the hospital hallway. She didn't see Mike or Dr. Riley. They were off conspiring somewhere—conspiring to kill her babies. But that wasn't going to happen. They weren't going to find her. She was going to hide—just like she used to hide when she was a little girl. She saw

the broom closet at the end of the hall. She pulled open the door, stepped inside, and closed the door securely behind her. It was nice in there, nice and dark, and safe.

It was then that the pain in her belly ripped at her again. It was worse this time—far worse than before.

But she didn't make a sound. She couldn't let them find her. She just settled onto the floor and sat there in the darkness. She'd take it. She'd endure the pain.

She took it until, after what seemed like hours, it receded a bit. And then, in a renewed explosion of white-hot agony, something ripped apart the muscles of her uterus and scrambled frantically out through the ruptured skin of her bleeding belly. In another second, something else crawled out after the first escapee and chased it straight into the corner.

Mrs. Linkous, the fourth-floor custodian, opened the closet door. She saw the dead woman lying on the floor, her belly ripped open and blood still oozing in semi-coagulated rivulets onto her white, white legs.

And something small, something sitting in the corner on its bloody haunches and munching on a tiny clawed hand, growled at her.

Mrs. Linkous slammed the door and began to scream. Dr. Riley and Mike were among the first to arrive.

"There's a dead woman in there!" screamed the custodian. "Blood everywhere. Her belly's all tore up—and something's in there with her—sitting in the corner—eating some kind of little hand—I swear it. I swear it. Oh God! Oh merciful God!"

It was then that it burst through the wooden door. It stood for only a second on two legs and glared around through shimmering, bloody eyes. And then it unfolded wet, slimy wings, leapt into the air, and flew straight down the hallway toward the sound it found totally irresistible.

Babies were crying in the hospital nursery.



NIGHT GAME

Turn to page 18 for an in-depth interview with WILLIAM RELLING JR.

Mr. Cooney, the club's general manager, told Bart Bowers that he was being sent down to the minors on the day after the doubleheader with the Indians. Bowers had struck out three times with men on base and then made an error in right field that had cost a pair of runs and, eventually, the second game.

Bowers didn't take the news very well. "This is Bart Bowers you're talkin' to, man!" he yelled. "Don't you remember last season? Rookie of the Year runner-up? A .293 average, twenty-two homers, seventy-nine ribbies? Don't you remember that, Mr. Cooney? That this team finished in the first division for the first time in eight years? And the attendance was up half a million people? Not to mention the contract that you personally signed me to last December. Mr. Cooney, you gonna give two hundred and fifty grand a year to a goddamn *minor league ballplayer*?"

"Yes," Mr. Cooney answered. "I suppose I am."

Then he reminded Bowers of his stats for this season: two weeks shy of the All Star break, Bowers was carrying a .173 average after 221 at-bats, had hit only four home runs, and had a total of nineteen RBIs. Not to mention that Bower's bad manners—which were barely tolerated during his rookie season because of his exceptional play—had now alienated his teammates to the point where only three days ago the team's shortstop, who was a Born-Again Christian, had been tempted to try and punch him in the mouth. He had also so infuriated the fans that one of them had thrown a brick through the driver's side window of Bower's Porsche 924 while it was sitting in the players' parking lot outside the stadium, following a recent game during which Bowers had gone oh-for-four and left a total of seven men stranded in scoring position.

"That's why you're going down, kid," Mr. Cooney said to him. "You'll either straighten up, or we'll bury you."

Bowers angrily refused to accept the

demotion, until a telephone call from his agent convinced him that he would be screwing Cooney and the ballclub more if he took their money and played. But when Bowers told his agent where he was being sent, the agent's voice seemed to change oddly, to take on a kind of chill. The agent told Bowers that he should work real hard on getting back up to the big leagues, and that if he kept his nose clean, maybe the agent could work out a deal. The Blue Jays *might* be interested, if Bowers could straighten himself out.

The next day, Bowers found himself on a Trailways Bus from Cleveland—where the big club was visiting—to Painesville, Ohio, where the club had its farm team. Bowers knew it was going to be bad as soon as he got off the bus and found nobody there waiting for him, and by the time he got his bags, hailed a cab, and rode to the ballpark, Bowers had barely fifteen minutes until the game started. Painesville's manager Ed Hardy chewed him out for being late. Then Hardy said that he had gotten advance warning about Bowers from Mr. Cooney, and that Bowers had better watch his ass because the team had ways of dealing with guys like him.

Everything about Painesville was as miserable as Bowers had expected it to be. The ballfield was in only slightly better condition than the beach at Anzio, and the clubhouse itself was a cramped crackerbox that lacked any semblance of air conditioning—which meant that there, in central Ohio in the middle of July, the temperature rarely dipped below a balmy eighty-five degrees, with humidity generally holding steady in the sixty-to-seventy percent range. Then there were Bower's teammates, a collection of former high school stars, sandlot rejects, and rheumy-eyed veterans on their way out (most of whom looked like the kind of guys who sleep beside the coffee machines in bus stations to keep warm in the winter). There was Ed Hardy, the team's manager, who did a twenty-four hour impression of Fred Mertz. There was also Hardy's third base coach Roosevelt "Spook" Robinson, the famous management brown-nosing Oreo who had spent twelve years in the majors accumulating a .252 lifetime average and was an ex-Cardinal, ex-

Oriole, ex-Met, ex-everything except ex-juicer. And last, but certainly least, was the team's batboy, an old geezer named Granny Walker, who acted like he was fourteen but looked more like ninety-three. What amazed Bowers most about Granny was that the old gleep was treated by everybody like he was the owner of the damn team. Why that could be, Bowers didn't have a clue.

He let them all know where he stood when he got his first hit in the third game with Painesville. Bowers lined a triple over the head of the opposing team's center fielder, slid into third, popped to his feet, dusted himself off, and gave the finger to the grandstands and both dugouts.

It was the beginning of the end of Bart Bowers.

Because he would never listen to Ed Hardy or Spook Robinson. They genuinely wanted to help him, and they would try to instruct him or signal him from the bench or the coaching box, but it did no good. Neither would he listen to Granny Walker, who had been the only one to notice the hitch in Bower's swing; instead Bowers tried to bean Granny with a throw while the old man was stacking bats near the on-deck circle. And neither did he listen to his teammates when they told him not to mess with the bat boy—and didn't Bowers notice how Granny only worked the team's night games and never travelled with them aboard the team bus when they went on the road, but was somehow always *there* for the games? Didn't he really know why Painesville was his last chance? Didn't Bowers know that Painesville was the end of the line?

No, he didn't.

So Bowers certainly was not going to listen to Ed Hardy when the manager called him into his office the night of what turned out to be the ballplayer's final game. In the third inning, Bowers had thrown a bat at a fan who had been heckling him from behind the dugout: "Aw, ya bum Bowers! Whyn't ya hit it with ya wallet!" Bower's bat fractured the fan's skull, and they'd had to call an ambulance and carry the guy off on a stretcher. For sure the team was looking a fat lawsuit right in the face.

When Ed Hardy told him that he was through, Bowers couldn't believe that the manager sounded almost sad. "We gave you your shot, kid," Hardy said. "Better'n three weeks. We tried to help you out. We tried to warn you, but you wouldn't listen. Now it's the end of the line."

Bowers told the manager that he and his entire team could make a serious effort at aerial fornication with the moon. Bowers didn't give a damn about the money anymore. He was leaving this turkeytrot organization for good.

He was right.

When Bowers got out of the shower forty minutes later, the clubhouse was deserted. Not that he cared to say goodbye to any of the yo-yos with whom he had been reluctantly associating with for the past three weeks. But as he was emptying his locker and stuffing his travel bag, he finally noticed something.

A faint odor tickled his nostrils. A light wind, the kiss of a breeze through the stagnant clubhouse air. Not just a cool breeze, but a cold rush of air that made him shiver.

Bowers looked up.

There was Granny Walker, standing in the doorway to the clubhouse. Bowers hadn't heard his footsteps, and at first Granny's appearance startled him. Then he recognized who it was and he growled at Granny the same advice he had given earlier to Ed Hardy.

Granny didn't say anything. He simply *glided* up to Bowers at his locker.

And the old man smiled.

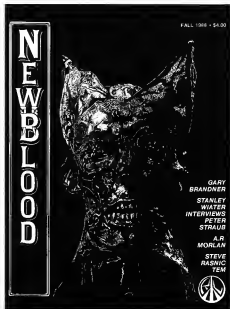
Granny's mouth fell open, and Bart Bowers suddenly realized where the odor in the clubhouse had come from—the fetid, decaying, dead smell. He saw that Granny's canine teeth had grown a good half inch in length.

At last Bart Bowers understood, and as Granny fell on him, he screamed.

The team did have ways of burying guys like him. They had Granny Walker. Granny Walker, who was no ordinary batboy.

Granny was a *vampire* batboy.





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